

# Contents

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<b>1</b>	<b>Paul and the Ephesians—</b> <i>June 24–30</i> —————	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>God’s Grand, Christ-Centered Plan—</b> <i>July 1–7</i> —————	<b>14</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The Power of the Exalted Jesus—</b> <i>July 8–14</i> —————	<b>22</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>How God Rescues Us—</b> <i>July 15–21</i> —————	<b>30</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Horizontal Atonement: The Cross and the Church</b> — <i>July 22–28</i> —————	<b>38</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The Mystery of the Gospel—</b> <i>July 29–August 4</i> —————	<b>46</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>The Unified Body of Christ—</b> <i>August 5–11</i> —————	<b>56</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Christ-Shaped Lives and Spirit-Inspired Speech—</b> <i>August 12–18</i> —	<b>64</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Living Wisely—</b> <i>August 19–25</i> —————	<b>72</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Husbands and Wives: Together at the Cross</b> — <i>August 26–September 1</i> —————	<b>80</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Practicing Supreme Loyalty to Christ—</b> <i>September 2–8</i> —————	<b>88</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>The Call to Stand—</b> <i>September 9–15</i> —————	<b>96</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Waging Peace—</b> <i>September 16–22</i> —————	<b>104</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Ephesians in the Heart—</b> <i>September 23–29</i> —————	<b>112</b>

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# Ephesians: How to Follow Jesus in Trying Times



**I**n the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul tells us about the Ephesians themselves. Years after the exciting events of the early days of Christian mission in Ephesus, the Ephesians struggled with the significance of their Christian faith.

Paul, once the troubler of the economy of this fourth-largest city in the Roman Empire, is now sidelined and imprisoned. Writing from prison, he worries that the believers in Ephesus may “lose heart,” forgetting any active sense of what it means to be disciples of Jesus in the sophisticated, urban, and thoroughly pagan culture of Ephesus. Though his hearers are already Christians, Paul’s tone is one of recruitment. He seeks to reenlist them in Christian faith, to reignite the fire of their devotion to Christ, and to resurrect the excitement of being part of God’s great enterprise in the world, the church.

Because the Christian faith is all about Christ, Paul radiates admiration and worship of Him. If wobbly Christian disciples are to regain their footing, it will be because they recapture their first love for Jesus and establish fresh trust in His grace and power. So, Paul highlights Christ’s exaltation in heaven, above all the powers and deities that seek to attract the devotion of believers in Ephesus. Jesus is the goal of the divine plan for the ages, a plan in which believers, as the church, play an important role in God’s plans to unify all things in Christ.

As Paul seeks to draw believers in Ephesus into fresh devotion to their Lord, he does not dumb down the demands of Christian discipleship. He spells out in some detail

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what Christian behavior and community look like. Christians are called to Spirit-inspired, Christ-honoring, God-directed worship, which Paul illustrates again and again. A devotion to Christ impacts how one acts and speaks. To love Christ means to respect and value fellow believers. It means resisting the patterns of mean-spirited and sexually decadent behavior so rampant in their culture. It means, in our relationships within church and household, borrowing from the example of self-sacrifice offered by Christ. It means offering fellow citizens of Ephesus clear examples of a new pattern of human existence.

Paul spends a good deal of his letter expressing his excitement for this new pattern of what it means to be human through membership in God's church. He is especially invigorated by the thought that God has joined estranged segments of humanity—Jews and Gentiles—as one in the church. In living out unity where hostility would be expected, they have an opportunity to exhibit the characteristics of God's new society and the coming kingdom.

In pursuing the importance of being part of God's church, Paul develops four metaphors for the church. Believers make up the body of Christ, demonstrating their devotion to Christ and their unity with each other. They are a living temple, built through the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, in which God is worshiped. They are the bride of Christ, who look toward a grand marriage ceremony when the Bridegroom comes to claim them as His own. In a final metaphor that expresses Paul's efforts to reenlist them in Christian faith, they are the army of Christ, which wages peace in His name, combating the forces of darkness in God's strength as they look toward Christ's return.

Ephesians, then, speaks especially to times like our own in which the allure of the world and the passing of time threaten to dull Christian discipleship. It lifts up Christ and accents the significance of following Him as engaged, active members of His church as we live out the hope of His return. This quarter we have the privilege of listening prayerfully to Ephesians and experiencing anew the excitement of following Jesus in challenging times.

*Ephesians speaks especially to times like our own in which the allure of the world and the passing of time threaten to dull Christian discipleship.*

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# Paul *and the* Ephesians



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 18:18–21; Acts 19:13–20:1; Acts 20:17–38; Eph. 1:1, 2; Eph. 6:21–24; Eph. 3:13; Eph. 1:9, 10.*

**Memory Text:** “Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (*Ephesians 1:9, 10, ESV*).

When we write something, we have a purpose for doing so, sometimes a weighty one. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, wrote his famous Gettysburg address in 1863 after the terrible devastation in the American Civil War battle there, which left about seven thousand soldiers dead. In that address, invoking the founding fathers, Lincoln expressed his belief that the Civil War was the ultimate test as to whether the nation created in 1776 would endure or would “perish from the earth.”

Paul has a profound purpose that motivates his letter. Partly because of his imprisonment (*Eph. 3:13, Eph. 6:20*), and partly because of ongoing persecution and temptations, the Ephesians are tempted to lose heart. Paul reminds them of what happened when they were converted, accepting Christ as their Savior and becoming part of the church. They have become Christ's body (*Eph. 1:19–23, Eph. 4:1–16*), the building materials in a temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*), the bride of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*), and a well-equipped army (*Eph. 6:10–20*). They play a strategic role in fulfilling God's grand plan, to unite everything in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). Paul writes to awaken the believers in Ephesus to their full identity and privileges as followers of Christ.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 1.

## Paul, Evangelist to Ephesus

**What** does Paul do on his first visit to Ephesus, at the end of his second missionary journey? (*Acts 18:18–21*).

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Ephesus was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, with a population of about two hundred fifty thousand. It was the capital of one of the empire's richest provinces, the province of Asia, which covered much of what we know today as Asia Minor. In Paul's day, the province was enjoying a time of growth and prosperity. A port city, Ephesus was also at the crossroads of important land routes. While the people worshiped many deities in the city, Artemis, regarded as the protector goddess of the city, was supreme. Her worship was the focus of civic ceremonies, athletic games, and annual celebrations. (Artemis was called Diana by the Romans; *see Acts 19:24, 35, KJV; NKJV*.)

Paul later returns to Ephesus on his third missionary journey (*Acts 19:1–12*) and remains there “for three years” (*Acts 20:31*). The apostle makes a significant time commitment to Ephesus, with the intention of firmly founding Christianity there.

**What** strange event leads to widespread reverence for “the Lord Jesus” in Ephesus? *Acts 19:13–20*.

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Luke shares the strange story of seven itinerant, Jewish exorcists in the city. Mingling the names of both Jesus and Paul in their incantations proves to be a misguided venture for these exorcists. When the news flashes through the streets of the city, “everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised” (*Acts 19:17, NRSV*). The event also had a profound impact on some of those who had already become believers, who publicly burned their expensive handbooks of magic arts worth “fifty thousand silver coins” (*Acts 19:19, NRSV*). With the wider residents of the city, believers learn that the worship of Jesus must not be diluted with the worship of anything or anyone else.

**What did the burning of their own books signify, even at such an expense to themselves? What does that say about a total commitment to the Lord?**

## A Riot in the Amphitheater

**Read** Acts 19:21–20:1. What lessons can we draw from this story?

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Paul's witness in the large, sophisticated city of Ephesus was so effective that it impacted an important economic engine for the city, tourism focused on the Temple of Artemis. And what a temple it was! This magnificent structure was composed partly of 127 pillars, each 60 feet high, of Parian marble, a pure-white, flawless marble highly prized for sculptures. Thirty-six of these pillars were sculpted and overlaid with gold, earning the temple its reputation as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Concerned that Paul's anti-idolatry rhetoric was draining financial support from the temple (*Acts 19:27*), Demetrius the silversmith whipped his fellow craftsmen into a frenzy. A rapidly expanding and highly energized crowd swept from the marketplace into the large amphitheater, which seated some twenty-five thousand people. There the commotion continued, featuring two continuous hours of shouting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (*Acts 19:34, ESV*). After the crowd is dispersed by the town clerk, Paul meets with the believers and leaves the city.

**At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul meets with elders of the Ephesian church. How would you summarize Paul's concerns? See Acts 20:17–38.**

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A tentative chronology of Paul's relationship to Ephesus:

- \* AD 52: Paul's initial, brief visit to Ephesus (*Acts 18:18–21*).
- \* AD 53–56: Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (*Acts 19:1–20:1*). He composes 1 Corinthians near the end of his stay there (*1 Cor. 16:5–9*).
- \* AD 57: While at Miletus, Paul meets with the elders from Ephesus (*Acts 20:17–38*).
- \* AD 62: Paul composes his letter to the Ephesians, probably from confinement in Rome.

**"Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears," said Paul (*Acts 20:31, NKJV*). What do you think Paul would warn our church about today, and why?**

## Hearing the Letter to the Ephesians

Paul wrote Ephesians to be read aloud in the house churches of believers in greater Ephesus. In the intervening years since Paul's departure, the Christian movement in Ephesus had grown, and the number of house churches had multiplied. For those early believers, it would have been an important event to have Tychicus, the personal representative of the founding apostle Paul, stand among them and share a letter from him. As suggested by the epistle itself, the assembled group likely included members of the host household—father, mother, children, and slaves (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*). At the time, a household included others, as well—clients (free persons who depended on the householder for support) and even customers. So, these may be present too, as well as members of other households.

**In conjunction with the outline of the letter below, read through the entire epistle, preferably out loud (it will take about fifteen minutes to do so). What themes echo through the letter as a whole?**

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- I. Opening Greeting (*Eph. 1:1, 2*)
  - II. Introductory Blessing (*Eph. 1:3–14*)
  - III. Praying for Believers to Receive Christ-Focused Wisdom (*Eph. 1:15–23*)
  - IV. Once Spiritually Dead; Now Exalted With Christ (*Eph. 2:1–10*)
  - V. Christ's Creation of the Church Out of Jews and Gentiles (*Eph. 2:11–22*)
  - VI. Paul as Preacher of Christ to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:1–13*)
  - VII. Praying for Believers to Experience the Love of Christ (*Eph. 3:14–21*)
  - VIII. Hold On to the Spirit-Inspired Unity of the Church (*Eph. 4:1–16*)
  - IX. Live the New, Unity-Nurturing Life (*Eph. 4:17–32*)
  - X. Walk in Love, Light, and Wisdom (*Eph. 5:1–20*)
  - XI. Practice Christ-Shaped Life in the Christian Household (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*)
  - XII. Stand Together: The Church as the Army of God (*Eph. 6:10–20*)
  - XIII. Closing Greeting (*Eph. 6:21–24*)

**What key theme seems to come through in this letter? What does it say to you? What specific point or points touch home?**

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## Ephesians in Its Time

**How** does Paul begin and end his letter to the believers in Ephesus? What do we learn about his deepest desires for them? See *Eph. 1:1, 2; Eph. 6:21–24*.

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At the outset of the letter, Paul identifies himself as the author (*Eph. 1:1*). Near the middle of the letter, Paul again identifies himself by name, labeling himself “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NKJV*), which introduces a personal reflection on his work as an apostle (*Eph. 3:1–13*). Near the end of the letter, he again refers to his imprisonment (*Eph. 6:20*) and concludes with personal words (*Eph. 6:21, 22*). While some scholars deny that the letter was written by Paul, it is important to note that the epistle clearly lays claim to Paul as its author. Most Christians accept, and rightly so, Paul as the author.

**How** does Paul worry about the effect his imprisonment will have on believers in Ephesus? See *Eph. 3:13*.

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Ephesians seems to share the same general timing and circumstances with other letters Paul writes from prison, Colossians (*see esp. Col. 4:7, 8*) and Philemon. Also considerable time seems to have passed since Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (*Eph. 1:15; Eph. 3:1, 2*). Paul probably composed Ephesians in a prison in Rome about AD 62.

In Ephesians, Paul offers few specifics about the situation of his audience in Ephesus. The scope of his attention is wide. He deals with a grand span of time, beginning with God’s decisions made “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*), and reflects broadly on grand themes of God’s salvation offered in Christ. In doing so, the letter exhibits an exalted, literary style, with long sentences, repetitive expressions, and developed metaphors. Paul can use such a style elsewhere (e.g., *Rom. 8:31–39*), but it is concentrated in Ephesians, which features a great deal of praise, prayer, and worship language (*Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 3:14–21*) and offers carefully crafted, highly rhetorical passages (e.g., *Eph. 4:1–16, Eph. 5:21–33, Eph. 6:10–20*).

## Ephesians: A Christ-Saturated Letter

**How** does Paul announce the theme of his letter? *Eph. 1:9, 10.*

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How can the message of Ephesians be summarized? From prison, Paul sets forth a vision of God's Christ-centered plan for the fullness of time and the church's role in it. God has acted in Christ to initiate His plan "to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*), and He did so by creating the church as an entity composed of one new humanity of both Jews and Gentiles (*Eph. 2:14*). Believers are called to act in concert with this divine plan, signaling to the evil powers that God's ultimate purpose is underway (*Eph. 3:10*).

As Ephesians 1:9, 10 proclaims, the unity God has in mind is centered in Christ. So, it is no surprise to discover that Ephesians is a Christ-drenched letter that everywhere praises the actions of God in Christ and celebrates the access of believers to the spiritual resources offered them in Christ. Paul employs the phrase "in Christ" and similar phrases more than thirty times, and everywhere lifts up Jesus. As you read the letter, watch for these phrases and stay alert to the many ways Paul focuses on Jesus.

Paul seeks to reignite the spiritual commitment of believers in Ephesus by reminding them that they are part of the church, which is at the heart of God's plan to unify all things in Christ. When he uses the word "church" (Greek, *ekklēsia*) in the letter, he means the "universal" church or the church at large (rather than a local congregation).

A principal strategy he uses is to talk about the church, and he does so using vivid metaphors, four of which he develops in some detail:

1. The church as a body (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 2:16; Eph. 3:6; Eph. 4:1–16, 25; Eph. 5:23, 29, 30*).
2. The church as a building/temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*).
3. The church as a bride (*Eph. 5:22–27*).
4. The church as an army (*Eph. 6:10–20*).

Each one of these images, in its own way, reveals what God's purpose and intention for His church is.

**In the church of which you are a part, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, God is drawing together a transnational, multilingual, multiracial, cross-cultural community (*Rev. 14:6, 7*) that points the way to the fulfillment of His plan to unite all things in Jesus (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). How can we work in concert with God's grand plan?**

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**Further Thought:** The story of the exorcists misusing the names of Jesus and Paul (*Acts 19:13–20*; see Sunday’s study) helps explain why Paul uses so much language about power in Ephesians. Some new believers, under fresh conviction of the sovereignty of Jesus, throw their expensive magic manuals into the flames. Thanks to the discovery of some two hundred fifty papyri dealing with magic, as well as other finds, we have ample illustrations of rituals, spells, formulas, curses, et cetera, similar to those likely featured in these manuals of magic. The volumes had advised believers how to conduct such rituals to persuade gods, goddesses, and spirit powers to do whatever they would ask.

Luke tells us that these volumes were worth 50,000 silver coins, or 50,000 days of wages. (In today’s setting, if you allow for \$80/day of wages for a skilled laborer, this amounts to \$4 million!) This detail demonstrates the importance and centrality of these volumes to their everyday lives. “It took the sovereign intervention of God for them to be sufficiently convicted that they should completely repent of their ongoing utilization of amulets, charms, invocations, and traditional means of gaining spiritual power.”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 34.

We come to understand that Ephesians was written to believers who needed instruction about “how to cope with the continuing influence and attacks of the sinister cosmic ‘powers.’ ”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), p. 165. Paul’s response is the Epistle to the Ephesians, in which he points to Christ as the One who has been exalted above every power (*Eph. 1:20–23*) and emphasizes the superiority of the strength that God provides to believers (*Eph. 2:15–19, Eph. 3:14–21, Eph. 6:10–20*).

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What powers or authorities are active in our world and your life today? How do these powers manifest themselves, tempting believers to honor and respect them rather than to give undiluted loyalty to the exalted Christ?
- ❷ In the context of God’s “fullness of time” plan to unite all things in Christ, Paul expresses hope for the future. Review his uses of the word “hope” in Ephesians 1:18, Ephesians 2:12, and Ephesians 4:4. Why does he believe there is hope for the future?
- ❸ In the following passages in Ephesians, how does Paul point to the great, future hope of Christ’s return? *Eph. 1:13, 14; Eph. 1:21; Eph. 2:7; Eph. 4:30; Eph. 5:5*. What does this hope mean for us right now?



# God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 1:3-14; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:13, 14; Deut. 9:29.*

**Memory Text:** “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (*Ephesians 1:3, ESV*).

**T**wenty-five years after becoming the first person to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong wrote a thank-you note to the creative team who designed the spacesuit, the Extravehicular Mobility Unit (EMU), in which he took those historic steps. Calling it “the most photographed spacecraft in history” and teasing that it was successful at hiding “its ugly occupant” from view, Armstrong thanked “the EMU Gang” at the Johnson Space Center for the “tough, reliable, and almost cuddly” suit that preserved his life, sending them “a quarter century’s worth of thanks and congratulations.”

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with a majestic thank-you note, praising God for the blessings He has poured out, blessings as essential to the lives of believers as a spacesuit is for someone who walks on the moon. Paul argues that God has been at work on these essential blessings since “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*) and praises God for working through the ages on behalf of believers.

Paul’s opening here makes Ephesians especially valuable in modeling how to worship God and to praise God for the many blessings He has provided.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 8.

## Chosen and Accepted in Christ

A thank-you note usually includes a description of the gift or gifts received. Paul includes a long gift list in Ephesians 1:3–14 as he thanks God for the blessings of the gospel.

Paul praises God for the fact that He has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (*Eph. 1:3, ESV*). That the blessings are spiritual (Greek, *pneumatikos*) suggests that they come through the Spirit (*pneuma*), pointing to the closing of Paul’s blessing, which celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (*Eph. 1:13, 14*).

Ephesians 1:3–6 contains inspiring language about how God views us in Christ. Before the creation of the world, God chose us in Christ and determined that we should stand “holy and blameless” in His presence (*Eph. 1:4, ESV; compare Eph. 5:27*) as treasured sons and daughters by virtue of both Creation and Redemption in Christ (*Eph. 1:5*). Since before the sun began to shine, it has been His strategy that we would be “accepted in the Beloved” (*Eph. 1:6, NKJV*). In short, it’s God’s intention for us to be saved. We lose salvation only by our own sinful choices.

**What** does the phrase “in the heavenly places” mean in Ephesians (the only place it is used in the New Testament)? Study the uses of the phrase. (See *Eph. 1:3, 20; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Eph. 6:12; compare the use of “in the heavens,” Eph. 3:15, Eph. 4:10, Eph. 6:9*.)

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In Ephesians the phrases “in the heavenly places” and “in the heavens” or “in heaven” point to heaven as the dwelling place of God (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 6:9*), to the location of spiritual powers (*Eph. 1:10, 20, 21; Eph. 3:10, 15; Eph. 6:12*), and to the location of Christ’s exaltation at the right hand of the Father (*Eph. 1:20*). Believers have access to these “heavenly places” in the present as the sphere where spiritual blessings are offered through Christ (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 2:6*). Though “the heavenly places” have become a place of blessing for believers, they are still the location of conflict from evil powers that contest the lordship of Christ (*Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*).

**Dwell on Ephesians 1:4, which says that we have been chosen in Him, Christ, “before the foundation of the world.” What does that mean? How does it reveal to us God’s love for us and His desire for us to be saved?**

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## Costly Redemption; Lavish Forgiveness

Sin had been a dark, dominating force in the lives of the members of Paul's audience. Paul can describe them in their prior existence as the walking dead—"dead in trespasses and sins" (*Eph. 2:1, NKJV*) yet "walking" or living as Satan commanded them (*Eph. 2:1–3*). Enslaved to sin and Satan, they had no ability to free themselves. They needed rescue. God has done so through His gracious actions in Christ, and Paul celebrates two new blessings of God's grace in the lives of believers: redemption and forgiveness.

**Read** Ephesians 1:7, 8. "Redemption" is an idea that is used frequently in the New Testament. Compare the uses of the idea in Colossians 1:13, 14; Titus 2:13, 14; and Hebrews 9:15. What themes do these passages share in common with Ephesians 1:7, 8?

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The Greek word translated "redemption" in Ephesians 1:7 is *apolutrōsis*, originally used for buying a slave's freedom or paying to free a captive. One can hear echoed the voice of the slave trader auctioning his merchandise and the cold grinding of a slave's manacles. When the New Testament discusses redemption, it highlights the costliness of setting the slaves free.

Our freedom comes at an extreme cost: "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). The idea of redemption also celebrates God's gracious generosity in paying the high price of our liberty. God gives us our freedom and dignity. We are no longer enslaved!

"To be redeemed is to be treated as a person, not an object. It is to become a citizen of heaven, rather than a slave of the earth."—Alister E. McGrath, *What Was God Doing on the Cross?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 78.

Note carefully that the idea that God pays the price of redemption to Satan is a medieval, not a biblical, one. God neither owes nor pays Satan anything.

The benefits of Calvary also include "the forgiveness of our trespasses" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). On the cross, Christ takes upon Himself the price of our sin, both past and future, "canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (*Col. 2:14, ESV*). In doing this work of redemption and forgiveness through Christ, God is acting as our generous Father, with the "riches of his grace" being "lavished upon us" (*Eph. 1:7, 8, ESV*).

**What does it mean to you that through Christ's atoning sacrifice you are forgiven and redeemed? What if you feel that you are unworthy of it? (Hint: you are unworthy; that's the whole point of the Cross.)**

## God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan

**What** is God's "plan for the fullness of time," and how extensive is its reach? *Eph. 1:9, 10.*

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Paul uses three labels for God's plan. It is (1) "the mystery of his will," (2) "his purpose," and (3) "a plan for the fullness of time" (*ESV*). What is God's ultimate, final plan? To unite everything, everywhere, in Jesus.

The term that Paul uses to describe the plan is a picturesque one (Greek, *anakephalaiōsasthai*), to "head up" or to "sum up" all things in Christ. In ancient accounting practice, you would "add up" a column of figures and place the total at the top. Jesus heads God's final, eschatological plan. This Christ-centered plan was crafted "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4*) and is so broad that it encompasses all time ("the fullness of the times," *NKJV*) and space ("all things . . . things in heaven and things on earth," *ESV*). Paul announces unity in Christ as the grand, divine goal for the universe.

In discussing God's "plan for the fullness of time" (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*), Paul shares the theme that he will weave through the letter. God begins His plan to unify all things, rooted in the death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus (*Eph. 1:15–2:10*), by founding the church and unifying disparate elements of humankind, Jews and Gentiles, in it (*Eph. 2:11–3:13*).

In this way, the church signals to the evil powers that God's plan is underway and their divisive rule will end (*Eph. 3:10*). As the Bible says elsewhere: "For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*).

The last half of Paul's letter opens with a passionate call to unity (*Eph. 4:1–16*) and continues with a lengthy exhortation to avoid behavior that damages unity and, instead, to build solidarity with fellow believers (*Eph. 4:17–6:9*). Paul concludes with the rousing image of the church as a unified army, participating with vigor in waging peace in Christ's name (*Eph. 6:10–20*).

**How can you acknowledge and celebrate that the redemption you have experienced in Christ Jesus is part of something sweeping and grand, an integral part of God's studied and ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ?**

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## Living in Praise of His Glory

**“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:11, 12, NKJV).**

The believers in Ephesus seem to have lost a clear sense of who they are as Christians, to have “lost heart” (see Eph. 3:13). In line with what he has affirmed earlier (Eph. 1:3–5), Paul wishes again to shore up their identity as Christians. Believers are not victims of haphazard, arbitrary decisions by various deities or astral powers. They are the children of God (Eph. 1:5) and have access to many blessings through Christ based on the deep counsels and eternal decisions of God. It is God’s purpose, counsel, and will (Eph. 1:11) that is being worked out in their lives in line with the still wider plan of God to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). They may have unshakable confidence in their standing before God and in the effectiveness of the blessings He provides. Their lives should shout the message of Ephesians 1:3–14: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

**Compare** the uses of the idea of “inheritance” in Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18. Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?

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Have you ever received an inheritance as the result of someone’s death? Perhaps a relative left you a valuable treasure or a considerable sum of money. In Paul’s view by virtue of the death of Jesus, Christians have received an inheritance from God (Eph. 1:14) and become an “inheritance” to God (Eph. 1:18).

In the Old Testament, God’s people are sometimes thought of as being His “heritage,” or inheritance (Deut. 9:29, Deut. 32:9, Zech. 2:12). This sense of being or becoming God’s inheritance is clear in Ephesians 1:18 and is the likely meaning of the term in Ephesians 1:11, as well (which would then be translated, “In him we have become an inheritance”). As a central element in their Christian identity, Paul wishes believers to know their value to God. They not only possess an inheritance from God (Eph. 1:14, Eph. 3:6; compare Eph. 5:5), but they are God’s inheritance.

**What is the difference between working to get something and inheriting it instead? How does this idea help us understand what we have been given in Jesus?**

## The Holy Spirit: Seal and Down Payment

**In** Ephesians 1:13, 14, Paul tells in brief the conversion story of his readers. What are the steps in that story?

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In exploring the importance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, Paul uses two images, or metaphors, for the Spirit. He first pictures the Holy Spirit as a “seal,” identifying a sealing presence of the Spirit that occurs from the time of conversion. In ancient times, seals were used for a wide variety of functions: to authenticate copies of laws and agreements, to validate the excellence or quantity of a container’s contents (e.g., *Ezek. 28:12*), or to witness transactions (e.g., *Jer. 32:10–14, 44*), contracts, letters (e.g., *1 Kings 21:8*), wills, and adoptions. Imprinted on an object, a seal announced both ownership and protection. The presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives marks believers as belonging to God and conveys God’s promise to protect them (*compare Eph. 4:30*). They have been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (*Eph. 1:13, ESV*).

“Paul plainly states that at the moment one gives his/her life to Jesus and believes in Him the Holy Spirit seals (Greek verb: *sphragizō*) that believer in Christ for the day of redemption. Wonderful liberating and reassuring truth! The Spirit of God marks Christ’s followers with the seal of salvation right when they first believe.”—Jiří Moskala, “Misinterpreted End-Time Issues: Five Myths in Adventism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), p. 95.

The second image Paul uses for the Holy Spirit is that of “guarantee.” The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, which looks toward the moment when the inheritance is to be given in full (*compare 2 Cor. 1:22, 2 Cor. 5:5*).

The word translated “guarantee” (*arrabōn*) was a Hebrew loan word that was used widely in the common or Koine Greek of New Testament times to indicate a “first installment,” “deposit,” or “down payment” that requires the payer to make additional payments.

Note that believers do not pay this down payment but receive it from God. The treasured presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, says Paul, is a first installment of the full inheritance of salvation and redemption that will come with the return of Christ. Our job is to receive with a grateful and submissive heart what we have been offered in Jesus.

**Further Thought:** Does Ephesians 1:3–14 teach that God predetermines the futures of human beings, predestining some to everlasting life and others to everlasting death? Many people, unfortunately, believe this. Consider, however, these ideas:

1. In the passage, the role of Christ is determinative, since the divine choice to adopt us occurs “through Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:5, ESV*) or “in him” (*Eph. 1:4, 11*). This suggests that God’s election and predetermination are exercised toward all who choose faith in Christ rather than selecting who will be saved or lost on a case-by-case basis even before people are born. God’s decision is the studied, predetermined, divine response to those who exercise faith in Christ.
2. Ephesians 1:3–14 also contains vivid relational language about God’s work of salvation. God is “Father,” and we are His “adopted” children (*Eph. 1:3–5*), who receive His blessings in bountiful measure (*Eph. 1:8*). We must understand the language about God’s choice and predetermination in the light of this rich, relational language. God is not a distant, unfeeling judge who makes decrees from afar but the caring Father of all His children (*see Eph. 3:15*).
3. That God honors human choice is reflected in Ephesians 1:3–14 (especially Ephesians 1:13, where “hearing” and “believing” are judged to be important), elsewhere in the letter (*Eph. 2:8, Eph. 3:17, Eph. 4:1–6:20*, all of which emphasize or presume the exercise of choice and the response of faith), and in other passages in the New Testament (*e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4, Acts 17:22–31*). Or, as Ellen G. White expressed it: “In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① What arguments would you add to those given above supporting the idea that God does not pick and choose before we have been created who will be saved and who will be lost?
- ② Whose choice ultimately decides whether or not a person has salvation in Jesus?
- ③ “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NKJV*). How does this verse reveal the reality of salvation by faith alone and not by the works of the law?

# The Power *of the* Exalted Jesus



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 3:14–21, 1 Thess. 5:16–18, Deut. 9:29, 1 Cor. 15:20–22, Ps. 110:1.*

**Memory Text:** Through the Holy Spirit, believers may know “what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places” (*Ephesians 1:19, 20, NKJV*).

**H**uman beings, it seems, are always reaching for more power. Auto manufacturer Devel Motors, for example, showed off the prototype of its Devel Sixteen, a vehicle with a 16-cylinder, 12.3-liter engine producing more than 5,000 horsepower. Or, if that is not enough, consider the Peterbilt semitruck that sports three Pratt & Whitney J34–48 jet engines. Boasting 36,000 horsepower, the truck does a quarter mile in 6.5 seconds and regularly hits 376 m.p.h. before deploying its two parachutes.

In contrast, Paul prays that believers in Ephesus, under temptation to admire the various powers and deities of their culture, will experience through the Holy Spirit the immensity of the power God makes available to them in Christ. This divine might is not measured in horsepower, or magic, but is seen in four cosmos-shifting, salvation-history events: (1) the resurrection of Jesus; (2) His exaltation at the throne of God; (3) all things being placed in subservience to Christ; and (4) Christ being given to the church as its Head (*Eph. 1:19–23*).

In considering these four events, believers may begin to grasp—and experience—the vast scope of the power God exercises on their behalf.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 15.



## Praying and Thanksgiving

Motivated by news that believers in Ephesus are thriving in faith toward Jesus and in love toward each other (perhaps news shared by Tychicus, *Eph.* 6:21, 22), Paul reports to them how he prays for them.

**Compare** Paul's two prayer reports in Ephesians—Ephesians 1:15–23 and Ephesians 3:14–21. What themes do the two reports share?

Sometimes our default tone in prayer can be doleful, mourning over this challenge or that problem. Paul's prayer reports in Ephesians suggest that thanksgiving is the native language of prayer. We gather up the blessings of God and thank Him for them. We seek to perceive God at work in difficult circumstances and praise Him for His transforming presence in our lives. Celebrating the grace and power of the exalted Jesus (*Eph.* 1:20–23), we thank Him for blessing those in our circle of influence. Here is Paul's transforming secret for prayer: *prayer is the key of praise and thanksgiving*.

Paul also said that he does “not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers” (*Eph.* 1:16, *NKJV*; see also *Phil.* 1:3, 4; *1 Thess.* 1:2; and *1 Thess.* 5:16–18).

What does it really mean to “pray without ceasing” (*1 Thess.* 5:17)? It cannot mean that we are always kneeling before God in prayer. It does mean that, blessed by God's Spirit, we move through life with hearts open to the presence and power of God, seeking cues for thanksgiving to Him. It means a readiness to process the issues of life in the presence of God, to seek divine counsel as we experience the twists and turns that life brings. It means living not in estrangement from God but in engagement with Him, ever open to divine leading.

We too often view prayer as a nicety, an add-on to discipleship that is to be exercised when convenient. Paul illustrates a different view. Paul takes seriously the task of praying for the believers in Ephesus, doing so both by giving thanks for them (*Eph.* 1:16; compare *Eph.* 1:3–14) and by interceding for them (*Eph.* 1:17–23; compare *Eph.* 3:14–21). For him, prayer is a central, or even *the* central, task of Christian faith. These verses provide a moving call to prayer, an invitation for each of us to consider our own “prayer ministry” in the light of Paul's dedication to it.

**Why is it important always to thank God in prayer for what you have to be thankful for?**

## Experiencing Insight From the Holy Spirit

**“I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Eph. 1:16, 17, ESV).**

In reporting his prayers, Paul records one central request that he places before the throne of God. He has already noted that the Holy Spirit has come into believers’ lives at the time of their conversion (Eph. 1:13, 14). Now Paul prays for a fresh blessing of the Spirit to give needed spiritual insight focused on a deepened understanding of Jesus (“in the knowledge of him,” Eph. 1:17).

**Paul** prays that the Holy Spirit will bring special insight to believers on what three topics? See Eph. 1:17–19.

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When Paul prays for insight for them about “the hope to which he has called you” (Eph. 1:18, ESV), he prays that they will be alert to the past actions God has already taken for their salvation (Eph. 1:3–9, 11–13) and to the glorious future He has planned for them (Eph. 1:10, 14).

When he prays for insight into “the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18, NKJV), he is recalling the Old Testament idea of believers as God’s inheritance (Deut. 9:29, Deut. 32:9, Zech. 2:12; compare Eph. 1:11). He wishes them to know that they not only possess an inheritance from God, but that they are God’s inheritance, and Paul wants them to understand their value to God.

When Paul prays for spiritual insight about “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:19, NKJV), he imagines the Holy Spirit bringing fresh understanding of the immensity of God’s power and actualizing it in their experience.

In all these prayers, Paul wants these people to experience for themselves what they have been given in Jesus.

**How can you better experience “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe”? What does this mean in daily life?**

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## Participating in Resurrection Power

In the remaining verses of Paul's prayer report, Ephesians 1:20–23, Paul expands on the third topic of insight he hopes that the Holy Spirit will bring to believers: the enormity of God's power, which He exercises on their behalf. Paul begins by pointing to two salvation-history events as the premiere illustrations of God's power: (1) the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and (2) the exaltation of Jesus to the throne of the cosmos (*Eph. 1:20*).

**How** is God's power expressed through the resurrection of Jesus? *Eph. 1:20; 1 Cor. 15:20–22; Phil. 3:8–11; Heb. 13:20, 21; 1 Pet. 1:3.*

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The resurrection of Jesus is a nonnegotiable belief of the Christian faith (*1 Cor. 15:14, 17*). It is because Christ is risen that faithful believers await the grand, future resurrection to eternal life at the time of Christ's return (*1 Cor. 15:20–23*). It is because Christ is risen that we can look to Him today for all the blessings of the gospel, including the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The imagery, that God “seated Him [Christ] at His right hand” (*Eph. 1:20, NKJV*), is drawn from Psalm 110:1, the most frequently cited passage in the New Testament (all of the passages just cited seem to draw on it). The exaltation of Christ has a high profile in Ephesians. Believers are “seated with . . . him [Christ Jesus] in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 2:6, ESV*). In addition, Paul refers to the ascent of Christ as a prelude to Christ's filling all things and giving gifts to His church (*see Eph. 4:8–11*).

In Ephesians 4:8–11, Paul warns us away from adopting a merely static image of Christ on the Father's throne, presenting rather “the dynamic NT picture of the exalted Christ going forth by His Spirit in all the world, conquering and to conquer.”—F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 133. So, Paul portrays the exaltation/coronation of Christ, not simply as an illustration of the divine power offered to believers but as the source of that power.

**What are the ways that you need Christ's power in your life, and how can we better avail ourselves of that power? What practices might hinder our access to His power?**

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## Christ Above All Powers

Paul has celebrated the exaltation of Jesus, who now sits with the Father on the throne of the cosmos. Having defined the position of Christ in relationship to the Father (“seated . . . at his right hand in the heavenly places” [*Eph. 1:20, ESV*]), Paul turns to the relationship of Jesus to “the powers.” As coregent with the Father, Jesus is “far above” them all (*Eph. 1:21*).

**Compare** Paul’s mentioning of evil, spiritual powers in Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 2:2, and Ephesians 6:12. Why do you think Paul is so interested in these powers?

Acts 19:11–20, with its story of the seven sons of Sceva, illustrates that Ephesus at the time of Paul was a center for the magic arts. “The overriding characteristic of the practice of magic throughout the Hellenistic world was the cognizance of a spirit world exercising influence over virtually every aspect of life. The goal of the magician was to discern the helpful spirits from the harmful ones and learn the distinct operations and the relative strengths and authority of the spirits. Through this knowledge, means could be constructed (with spoken or written formulas, amulets, etc.) for the manipulation of the spirits in the interest of the individual person. With the proper formula, a spirit-induced sickness could be cured, [or] a chariot race could be won.”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, p. 18.

The interest in naming deities and powers in spells was a feature of religious life in Ephesus (see *Acts 19:13*), and among some even today. Paul wishes to make clear the relationship between Christ and “the powers”: The exalted Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*).

Just to be sure that his audience understands that there is no power outside of the sovereignty of Jesus, he adds an allusion to the practice of gathering up the names of deities in spells: “and above every name that is named” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*). Turning from the dimension of space to that of time, Paul stresses the unlimited chronology of Jesus’ exalted rule. His rule over all powers applies “not only in this age but also in the one to come” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*).

**What are some present-day manifestations of these same evil forces, and how can we make sure that we don’t get caught up in any of them?**

## Jesus, All Things, and His Church

Early Christians saw in Psalm 110:1 a prophecy of the exaltation of Jesus: “The LORD says to my LORD: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’ ” (*ESV*). They read Psalm 8 in the same way, with its affirmation that God has “put all things under his feet,” (*Ps. 8:6, ESV*), the feet of “the son of man” (*Ps. 8:4, ESV*). While they believed that the powers of darkness in the heavenly places were over their heads and threatened to subjugate them, they laid hold of the truth that those powers were under Christ’s feet.

Note carefully that having “put all things under his [Jesus’] feet,” the Father “gave him as head over all things to the church” (*Eph. 1:22, ESV*; compare “gave Him to be head over all things to the church,” *NKJV*). While “all things” is a universal, inclusive term, Paul still has in mind “the powers” mentioned in Ephesians 1:21. All things—the cosmic, supernatural, spiritual powers included—are under the feet of Christ, subservient to Him.

**What** benefits does the exaltation of Christ to the throne of the cosmos, and His rule over all things in heaven and on earth, provide for His church? *Eph. 1:22, 23*.

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God has made Christ victorious over all evil powers. The church, closely identified with Christ and supplied by Him with all it needs, is itself guaranteed victory over those foes. The power of God, on display in the resurrection and His exaltation over every cosmic power, has been activated for the church. God has given the victorious Christ to the church, which is so united with Him as to be called His body.

How can we believers know the exalted Christ and experience God’s power in our lives? Paul does not directly address any mechanisms or strategies by which this occurs. However, the fact that the passage is part of a “prayer report” is suggestive. Paul believes that God will answer his prayer. He affirms the efficacy of celebrating God’s power, revealed in Christ, in God’s own presence and asking for it to be active in the lives of believers.

**What has been your own experience with the power of prayer? That is, not just answered prayers but prayer in general, and how does prayer draw us closer to God and the power offered us in Jesus?**

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**Further Thought:** Study these two descriptions of Christ's exaltation from the writings of Ellen G. White:

"When Christ passed within the heavenly gates, He was enthroned amidst the adoration of the angels. As soon as this ceremony was completed, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in rich currents, and Christ was indeed glorified, even with the glory which He had with the Father from all eternity. The Pentecostal outpouring was Heaven's communication that the Redeemer's inauguration was accomplished. According to His promise He had sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to His followers as a token that He had, as priest and king, received all authority in heaven and on earth, and was the Anointed One over His people."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 38, 39.

"The Father's arms encircle His Son, and the word is given, 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.' Hebrews 1:6.

"With joy unutterable, rulers and principalities and powers acknowledge the supremacy of the Prince of life. The angel host prostrate themselves before Him, while the glad shout fills all the courts of heaven, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.' Revelation 5:12.

"Songs of triumph mingle with the music from angel harps, till heaven seems to overflow with joy and praise. Love has conquered. The lost is found. Heaven rings with voices in lofty strains proclaiming, 'Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.' Rev. 5:13."—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 834, 835.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① Ponder the "now" and "not yet" of the exaltation of Jesus. In what sense is Jesus already the Lord of "all things," with the demonic powers subservient to Him—that is, the "now"? And in what sense does His full reign over all things look toward the future—the "not yet"? (See 1 Cor. 15:24–28.)
- ② To what extent are you living in the light of Christ's rule over all things? Or to what extent are you living under the authority of these other powers, the fallen powers, whose authority is ebbing away anyway? How do you know which is which, and how can you get away from the forces of evil that, though certainly defeated, are still prevalent in our world?

# How God Rescues Us



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 2:1–10, Eph. 5:14, Rom. 5:17, Eph. 5:6, 2 Tim. 1:7.*

**Memory Text:** “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (*Ephesians 2:4, 5, ESV*).

On October 14, 1987, eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure was playing in her aunt's backyard when she fell twenty-two feet into an abandoned well. Her plight attracted media from around the world to Midland, Texas. A global audience watched “Baby Jessica” sleeping, crying, singing, and calling out for her mother. They watched as emergency workers piped fresh air down the well.

Finally, fifty-eight hours after Jessica's fall, the worldwide audience watched as Jessica was released from the eight-inch well casing that had trapped her for more than two days. Photographer Scott Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph captured the moment: a rescue cable bisects the worried faces of Jessica's rescuers looking down at the bandaged bundle at the heart of the drama, Baby Jessica.

There's nothing quite as gripping as a good rescue story, and Paul, in *Ephesians 2:1–10*, gives us an up-close-and-personal view of the grandest, most sweeping rescue mission of all time—God's efforts to redeem humanity. The drama of the story is heightened by knowing that we are not mere spectators of someone else's rescue but witnesses of our own.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 22.

## Once Dead and Deceived by Satan

**Read** Ephesians 2:1–10. What is the main idea that Paul is giving us here about what Jesus has done for us?

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Paul has already described the salvation given to Christians (*Eph. 1:3–14, 15–23*) and told, in brief, the story of the believers in Ephesus (*Eph. 1:13*). In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul will now tell their conversion story in more detail, with a more personal focus. He contrasts their past, sinful existence (*Eph. 2:1–3*) with the blessings of God’s salvation, which he portrays as a participation in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ (*Eph. 2:4–7*), and he celebrates the basis of that salvation in the grace and creative work of God (*Eph. 2:8–10*).

These three sections of the passage are summarized neatly in the phrases of Ephesians 2:5: (1) “we were dead in our trespasses”; (2) God “made us alive together with Christ”; (3) “by grace you have been saved” (*ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:1, 2, Paul underlines the sad reality of the pre-conversion existence of his audience by noting that they were spiritually dead, practicing trespasses and sins as their regular pattern of life (*Eph. 2:1*), and were dominated by Satan (*Eph. 2:2*). Since Paul writes to living people, he refers to them as once “dead” in a metaphorical sense (*compare Eph. 5:14*). However, their plight was very real and dire since they were once separated from God, the Source of life (*compare Col. 2:13, Rom. 5:17, Rom. 6:23*).

Reflecting on the past lives of his hearers, Paul identifies two external forces that dominated them. The first of these is “the course of this world” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*)—the customs and behavior in the wider society of Ephesus that misshaped human life into rebellion against God.

Satan is described in two ways as the second external force that dominated their prior existence. He is “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*) since “the air” (or “the heavenly places”) is identified as the location of supernatural powers, including evil ones (*compare Eph. 1:3, Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*). Also, he is active on earth since he is “the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*).

**What do these verses teach about the reality of the great controversy? At the same time, how can we draw comfort and hope in the knowledge that Jesus has been victorious and that we can share in His victory now?**

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## Once Deluded by Our Own Desires

**“All of us also lived among them [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (Eph. 2:3, *NIV*).**

Apart from the intervention of God, human existence is dominated not only by the external forces mentioned in Ephesians 2:2 but also by internal ones: “the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*; compare James 1:14, 15; 1 Pet. 1:14).

**What** does Paul mean by stating that his hearers were once “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*)? Compare Ephesians 2:3 and Ephesians 5:6.

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The present reality of a lost life is distressing enough, but its last-day implications are more frightening still. Human beings, being “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*) stand under the threat of God’s judgment at the end of time.

The phrase “by nature children of wrath” points to another daunting reality, as well. While still bearers of the image of God, we have come to understand that there is something deeply awry in us. Living the Christian life, then, is not just a matter of conquering a bad habit or two or overcoming whatever “trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1) are currently threatening. We do not just contend with *sins* but with *sin*. We are bent toward rebellion against God and toward self-destruction. Humans, by default, are caught in a pattern of self-destructive, sinful behavior, following the dictates of Satan (Eph. 2:2) and our own innate, sinful desires (Eph. 2:3). Believers once were “by nature the children of wrath.”

It is important to note that Paul employs a past tense—we “were by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). This does not mean that an inherent bent toward evil is no longer a reality for believers. Paul spends a considerable portion of his letter (Ephesians 4:17–5:21) warning that sinful acts, rooted in a sinful nature, remain a threat for Christians. It does mean, though, that this “old self” need no longer dominate the believer, who through the power of Christ can “put off your old self” and “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22–24, *ESV*).

**Who hasn’t experienced just how corrupted our own nature is, even after we have given ourselves to Jesus? What should this teach us about how important it is that we cling to Him every moment of our lives?**

## Now Resurrected, Ascended, and Exalted With Christ

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us” (*Eph. 2:4, NKJV*). Here, with two powerful words, “But God” Paul pivots from his doleful portrait of the past lives of his audience (*Eph. 2:1–3*) to the new, hope-filled realities that mark their lives as believers (*Eph. 2:4–10*).

**In what sense do believers participate in Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and exaltation? When does this participation occur? *Eph. 2:6, 7*.**

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We have noted that Ephesians is a Christ-drenched letter highlighting the solidarity of believers with Christ. In Ephesians 2:5 and 6, Paul extends this theme by deploying three compound verbs to unleash the stunning truth that, through God’s initiatives, believers themselves participate in important salvation history events that center on the Messiah, Jesus.

Believers are (1) co-resurrected with Christ; (2) co-raised up with Christ (which Paul probably uses to indicate the participation of believers in Christ’s ascension to heaven); and (3) co-seated with Christ “in the heavenly places,” meaning that believers participate in Christ’s “seating” on the throne of the cosmos. They are co-exalted with Jesus.

To appreciate the power of Paul’s argument, we must look back to Ephesians 1:19–23 and recall that in His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, Christ gains the victory over all evil and spiritual powers, the very ones who once dominated the lives of believers. In the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus, these powers—though still active and threatening to human existence—have been thoroughly superseded. The cosmos has shifted. Reality has changed. Believers are not mere spectators to these events but are personally and intimately involved in them. That we are co-resurrected, co-ascended, and co-exalted with Jesus opens up a whole new array of possibilities for us. We have the right to turn from a demon-dominated existence to a life of spiritual abundance and power in Christ (*2 Tim. 1:7*).

**“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (*2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV*). How do the verses we looked at today help us understand what Paul writes here?**

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## Now Blessed Forever by Grace

**Compare** God’s planning for salvation in Ephesians 1:3, 4 with the eternal results of that plan described in Ephesians 2:7. What are essential elements and goals of God’s “plan of salvation”?

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Graduation ceremonies are wonderful celebrations, whether for kindergarten or a PhD. A graduation marks an important accomplishment, the move to a different stage of life or career. It is important for us as believers to understand a profound truth of the gospel: we never graduate from grace. There is never a celebration that we have attained our PhD in grace or graduated from our need of it.

Paul affirms this truth in Ephesians 2:7, accenting it with an expansive chronology. God has acted in the past in Christ to redeem us, so identifying us with His Son, Jesus Christ, that we are in the present coparticipants in His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation (*Eph. 2:4–6*). God’s plan, though, does not end with a grace-filled past and a mercy-bathed present. God’s plan, rooted in divine councils in time immemorial (*Eph. 1:4*), stretches forever into the future. It includes all “the coming ages” (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*). His plan for the eternal future is founded on the same principle as His actions in the past and present—the principle of grace. “In the coming ages,” God looks forward to demonstrating “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*).

Paul thinks of God’s grace as a treasure or fortune of unfathomable value (*compare Eph. 1:7, Eph. 3:8*) from which believers may draw to meet any need. This grand generosity of God toward us becomes an eloquent, ageless, and cosmic exhibit of His grace.

“By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. . . . But not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. God’s wonderful purpose of grace, the mystery of redeeming love, is the theme into which ‘angels desire to look,’ and it will be their study throughout endless ages. Both the redeemed and the unfallen beings will find in the cross of Christ their science and their song. It will be seen that the glory shining in the face of Jesus is the glory of self-sacrificing love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 19, 20.

## Now Saved by God

**Read** back through Ephesians 2:1–10, focusing on Paul’s conclusion in verses 8–10. What points does he highlight as he concludes the passage?

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In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul documents that the salvation of the believers in Ephesus does not occur because of their good behavior or winsome qualities. When the story begins, they are spiritually dead. There’s not a spark of life or worth in them (*Eph. 2:1*). They have been utterly conquered by sin (*Eph. 2:1*). They exhibit no personal initiative but are led around by Satan himself and by their own base passions and mental delusions (*Eph. 2:2, 3*).

Unknown to them, they are in a far worse position than simply being without spiritual life or virtue. In company with all humankind, they are the enemies of the true God and are moving toward a day of destiny and divine judgment. They are “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*).

Instead of being rooted in their own qualities, their salvation is rooted in God’s inexplicable love—a love that cannot be explained based on any worth in the object of that love. In mercy and love, God acts on their behalf in Christ Jesus (*Eph. 2:4*), resurrecting them from spiritual death. Because of God’s intervention, they experience an amazing itinerary that follows the trajectory of Jesus Himself. From the extreme depth of utter spiritual death and grinding slavery, they are resurrected and conveyed to the “heavenly places” and seated with Christ on the cosmic throne (*Eph. 2:5, 6*). This lightning-like, divine intervention, though, is no momentary phenomenon. It has real staying power, eternal durability, because God intends to exhibit His grace toward them in Christ Jesus throughout all eternity (*Eph. 2:7*).

In his conclusion to Ephesians 2:1–10 (*Eph. 2:8–10*), Paul goes back over this ground, wishing to ensure that his point sticks: the salvation of believers is a divine work, not a human one. It does not originate in us but in God’s gift. No human being can boast of having sparked it (*Eph. 2:8, 9*). Standing in the grace of God, we believers are exhibits of His grace, and only of His grace. We are His masterpieces, created by God “in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 2:10*).

**Why is it so important for us to understand that our salvation is from God and is not rooted in our own worth or efforts?**

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**Further Thought:** Underlying the Epistle to the Ephesians is a story that is often rehearsed in part or alluded to in it. The major events in the narrative are the following:

1. God's choice of the people "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4, 5, 11*).
2. Their past, lost existence (*Eph. 2:1–3, 11, 12; Eph. 4:17–19, 22; Eph. 5:8*).
3. The intervention of God in Christ to save them (*Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 2:4–6, 13–19; Eph. 4:1, 20, 21; Eph. 5:2, 8, 23, 25, 26*).
4. Their acceptance of the gospel (*Eph. 1:12, 13 and implied elsewhere*). Having once "no hope" (*Eph. 2:12*), they now possess the "one hope" toward which believers move (*Eph. 4:4; compare Eph. 1:18*).
5. The present lives of the addressees as disciples. Though living at a time fraught with hazards and the opposition of the evil powers, they may draw on the resources offered by their exalted Lord (*Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:6, Eph. 3:14–21, Eph. 4:7–16, Eph. 6:10–20*).
6. In the future culmination of history, the Spirit's role as "guarantee" (*Eph. 1:13, 14, ESV*), or "seal" (*Eph. 4:30*), reaches fruition. In this crowning moment, the addressees will be rewarded for their faithfulness by taking possession of the "inheritance" already granted to them in Christ (*Eph. 2:7; Eph. 6:8, 9*); and, through their faith in Christ, they will be granted a place in the Christ-centered age to come (*Eph. 1:21; Eph. 2:7, 19–22; Eph. 4:13, 15; Eph. 5:27*).

## Discussion Questions:

- ① The underlying story of Ephesians (see above) is not just the story of believers in the first century. It is our own story. Which of the major steps or stages of that story gives you the most hope in this moment?
- ② Why do you think it is that Paul so frequently recalls the sinful past of his audience, inviting them to reflect on their pre-conversion lives?
- ③ Compare Paul's summary of the gospel in Ephesians 2:8–10 to his earlier summary in Romans 1:16, 17. What similar themes emerge? In what ways are the two different?
- ④ While the good works of believers play no role in their redemption, in that they can never give people saving merit before God, what important part do they play in God's plans for believers? *Eph. 2:10*.

# Horizontal Atonement: The Cross *and the Church*




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 2:11–22, Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19, John 14:27, 1 Cor. 3:9–17.*

**Memory Text:** “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one” (*Ephesians 2:13, 14, ESV*).

**Y**ou are a Gentile, a Greek, who has learned to treasure the God of the Jews. In fact, you have left your worship of many gods and have embraced the one true God. As you make your way through the beautiful courtyards and fluted columns of the Jerusalem temple, the sounds of worship call forth your praise. Just then, though, you find yourself confronted by a stone barricade four feet high. Engraved every few feet in Latin and Greek is this message: “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” In that moment you feel shut out, alienated, and separated.

In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul sees the cross of Christ as making a dramatic difference, destroying such barriers and walls. Vertically, the Cross dissolves alienation, reconciling humans with God. Horizontally, it reconciles people with each other. The Cross removes enmity and brings peace between Jews and Gentiles, making of them “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV*). Together they become a new temple, “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, ESV*).

What does this truth mean for us today?

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 29.

## Brought Near in Christ

**Compare** Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul’s earlier description of the Gentile past of the addressees, with Ephesians 2:11, 12. What does he accent in his fresh description of their past?

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Gentiles who were now believers in Christ and members of His “body,” the church, were once totally separated from Israel and the salvation God offered. Paul judges it important for them to “remember” (*Eph. 2:11*) this past. They were then “without Christ,” the Anointed One, the Messiah of Israel. They were “aliens from the commonwealth [the state or people] of Israel.” And they were “strangers from the covenants of promise,” oblivious to the promises of salvation God had offered down through salvation history. The alienation from Israel and the salvation offered through it meant that they once had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (*Eph. 2:12, NKJV*).

Also, in their past existence, Gentiles were caught up in a grand feud between themselves and the Jews. Paul gives a sense of this entrenched hatred by referring to one symptom of it, name-calling. Jews referred to Gentiles with derision as “the uncircumcision,” and Gentiles referred to Jews with equal disdain as “the circumcision” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Ephesians 2:13, however, points to something radically different now. Paul wrote: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*NKJV*).

When Paul describes Gentile believers as once “far off,” he borrows from Isaiah 57:19: “ ‘Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him’ ” (*ESV; compare Eph. 2:17, 18*). In Christ and through His cross, Gentile believers had been brought near to all from which they were separated—God, hope, and their Jewish brothers and sisters. Here is the powerfully good news implied by Paul’s description: that the cross of Christ can heal the wide rift between Jews and Gentiles means that all of our feuds and divisions can be resolved there. This good news invites us to consider the divisions that exist in our own lives and in the church and to ponder the power of the Cross to supersede them.

**From what condition has Jesus redeemed you? Why might it be important for you to recall, with some regularity, where you were when He found you and where you might now be had He not found you?**

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## Reconciliation: God's Gift From the Cross

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might . . . reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:14–16, ESV*).

**How** does Paul describe the Cross and the impact of Christ's work there in each of these passages in Ephesians? How would you summarize what Paul says about the Cross and how it transforms our relationships? (*See Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 4:32; Eph. 2:13, 14; Eph. 2:16; Eph. 5:2, 25.*)

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In the context of our passage for this week, Ephesians 2:11–22, the Cross yields three great assets for believers: (1) Gentiles, who were “far” from God and His people, are “brought near” (*Eph. 2:13, ESV*) to both, being now sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Jewish believers (*Eph. 2:19*); (2) the “hostility” (Greek, *echthran*, “enmity,” related to *echthros*, “enemy”) between Jewish and Gentile believers is itself “put to death” (*Eph. 2:16, NASB*). The cross of Christ removes what seemed to be the permanent state of hostility and war in which Jews and Gentiles were sworn enemies (*Eph. 2:17*); (3) in the place of hostility comes reconciliation. It was Christ's purpose to “reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:16, NKJV; compare Col. 1:19–22*).

What does reconciliation look like? How does it feel to be reconciled? Imagine severe estrangement between a mother and daughter, one that has settled in over a period of years. Imagine this rancor being dissolved in a wave of grace and forgiveness and the ensuing reunion between the two. That is reconciliation. Reconciliation is experienced in the moment when one church member lays aside whatever issue divides from another and acknowledges the other church member as a beloved brother or sister who accepts what has been offered. Reconciliation is not a mechanical or legal term but an interpersonal one that celebrates the mending of broken relationships. Paul dares to imagine Christ's powerful work on the cross as impacting the relationships, between not just individuals but also people groups. He imagines it invading our lives and destroying our divisions, dissolving our quarrels, and renewing our fellowship with and understanding of each other.

**In what ways might you need to apply the principles here to be reconciled to someone else? How do you go about doing it?**



## Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

**What** action does Paul say Christ took toward “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*)? Why did He take this action? (See *Eph. 2:14, 15*.)

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Paul probably alludes here to the balustrade or fence that surrounded the court of Israel in Herod’s Temple, with its death threat. Paul imagines this wall coming down and Gentiles being granted full access to worship God (*Eph. 2:18*). Any such wall, says Paul, is removed by the Cross. For there we learn that these two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, are really one.

Some believe that Ephesians 2:14, 15 teaches that the Ten Commandments, inclusive of the Sabbath commandment, are “abolished” or “set aside” by the Cross. However, in Ephesians, Paul demonstrates profound respect for the Ten Commandments as a resource for shaping Christian discipleship. He quotes the fifth commandment (*Eph. 6:2, 3*) and alludes to others (*e.g., the seventh, Eph. 5:3–14, 21–33; the eighth, Eph. 4:28; the ninth, Eph. 4:25; the tenth, Eph. 5:5*). This aligns with Paul’s earlier assertions about the law (*Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12*). He addresses the misuse of the law, but he honors the law itself and assumes its continuity. Hence, to use these verses to abolish the Ten Commandments, especially in light of all the other verses in the Bible about the perpetuity of the law, is clearly a misinterpretation of Paul’s intent here.

Instead, any use of the law to drive a wedge between Jews and Gentiles and especially to exclude Gentiles from full partnership among the people of God and access to worship, would be anathema to Paul and a misuse of the divine intention for the law. The “law” in Ephesians 2:14, 15 is either the ceremonial aspects of the law that divided Jew from Gentile, represented in Paul’s complex phrase “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*), or it is the whole Old Testament system of law as it had come to be interpreted, augmented, and misused as a wedge to distance Jews from Gentiles.

**What tensions among Seventh-day Adventists or among members of the wider Christian community need to be confronted and overcome? Why should our common love of Christ be enough to overcome these tensions?**

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## Jesus, Preacher of Peace

**How** does Paul summarize the ministry of Christ in Ephesians 2:17, 18?

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The concept of peace is important in Ephesians, with the letter beginning and ending with blessings of peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:2, NKJV; compare Eph. 6:23*). Earlier in Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul argued that Christ personifies peace, “For He Himself is our peace,” and that His Cross creates it (*Eph. 2:14–16, NKJV*). Christ not only destroys something—the hostility between Jew and Gentile (*Eph. 2:14, 15*)—He creates a new humanity, marked by relationships of reconciliation and peace (*Eph. 2:15–17*). Such peace is not just the absence of conflict but resonates with the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, the experience of wholeness and well-being, both in our relationship with God (*Rom. 5:1*) and with others.

**How** does Paul imagine believers participating in sharing Jesus’ message of peace? *Eph. 4:3; Eph. 6:14, 15; compare Rom. 10:14, 15 with Eph. 2:17–19, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19.*

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The Gospels contain examples of Jesus as a preacher of peace. In His farewell messages to the disciples, He promises them—and us—“ ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you’ ” (*John 14:27, NKJV*). And He concludes, “ ‘I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ ” (*John 16:33, ESV*). After His resurrection, when He appears to the disciples, He repeatedly says to them, “ ‘Peace be with you’ ” (*John 20:19, 21, 26, ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:17, 18, Paul is keen to point out that Christ’s preaching of peace extended beyond the time of His earthly ministry. He has “preached peace” in the present to both “far” (Gentile believers before they were converted; *ESV*) and “near” (Jewish believers, *ESV; compare Eph. 2:11–13*). Having accepted this proclamation, all believers experience a profound blessing.

**How can we learn to be preachers of peace as opposed to conduits of conflict? To what situations, right now, can you help bring healing?**

## The Church, a Holy Temple

**What** culminating set of images does Paul use in Ephesians 2:11–22 to signal unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church?

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Reviewing Ephesians 2, we recall that verses 1–10 teach that we live in solidarity with Jesus, while verses 11–22 teach that we live in solidarity with others as part of His church. Jesus’ death has both vertical benefits in establishing our relationship with God (*Eph. 2:1–10*) and horizontal ones in cementing our relationships with others (*Eph. 2:11–22*). Through the Cross, Jesus demolishes all that divides Gentile believers from Jewish ones, including the misuse of the Law in order to widen the gulf (*Eph. 2:11–18*). Jesus also builds something—an amazing, new temple composed of believers. Gentiles, once excluded from worship in the sacred places of the temple, now join Jewish believers in becoming a new temple. We all become part of God’s church, “a holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph. 2:19–22, ESV*) and are privileged to live in solidarity with Jesus and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**How** does Paul’s use of the metaphor of the church as a temple in Ephesians 2:19–22 compare with the uses in the following passages? *1 Cor. 3:9–17, 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*.

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Paul employs the metaphor of the church as temple as a culminating image for the full inclusion of Gentiles in the church. Once banned from worship in the “Court of Israel” in the temple, they now not only gain access (*Eph. 2:18*) but themselves become building materials for a new temple designed as “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, NKJV*).

New Testament authors employ the temple metaphor to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, and the solidarity of believers within the church. The metaphor is used in conjunction with biological language (*see Eph. 2:21*, where the temple “grows”), and the process of building is often accentuated (*see Eph. 2:22*, “you also are being built together,” *ESV*). Rather than a static image, the church is able to acknowledge its identity as “the temple of the living God” (*2 Cor. 6:16, NKJV*).

**Further Thought:** Study carefully the following preamble to the discussion questions listed below:

What is the specific context in which Paul writes Ephesians 2:11–22 as he describes the sweeping effects of the Cross on human relationships? He is addressing the relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers who together are members of the church. He expresses an obvious concern that they understand and live their shared, reconciled status as fellow members of God’s household (*Eph. 2:19*). However, in the context of the letter as a whole, Paul demonstrates a broad, far-reaching purpose. His theme is God’s grand, ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and his scope includes “every family in heaven and on earth” (*Eph. 3:15, ESV*).

More important, the unity of members within the church—the specific topic he addresses in Ephesians 2:11–22—itself has a wider purpose that Paul discloses in Ephesians 3:10: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God [in creating the church out of both Jews and Gentiles] might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*). Through actualizing the unity Christ won on the cross, believers are to signal that God’s ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ is underway. Their reconciled relationships signal God’s plan for a universe unified in Christ. So, it is appropriate to look to Ephesians 2:11–22, set in the context of Ephesians as a whole, for biblical principles concerning a topic of importance today, relationships among people groups or races.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What biblical principles concerning ethnic relations are provided in Ephesians 2:11–22? How does the passage offer a distinctive, Christ-centered approach to the theme of how members of one ethnic group should relate to members of another?
- ❷ Given God’s plan for the future of humankind (*Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), how important is it for the church to deal with its own internal issues and conflicts between races?
- ❸ What simmering issues between ethnic groups, which all too often may be hidden and ignored, exist in your community? How might your church play a positive role in actualizing the unifying work Christ already has accomplished on the cross? How might you participate in that work?

# The Mystery of the Gospel



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ephesians 3; Job 11:5–9; Ezek. 43:13–16; Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2.*

**Memory Text:** “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (*Ephesians 3:20, 21, NIV*).

In Ephesians 3, Paul opens with a theme that he had already touched on earlier: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, NKJV*). And though that might not be much of a surprise to the church today, composed mostly of Gentiles, it was something that seemed radically new to many of his readers at that time.

Paul then continues his inspired words, as the apostle reflects on his passion to preach the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles.

We learn, too, of his current hardships in extending that ministry, hardships that include time in a Roman prison.

And we also hear his commitment to the mystery at the heart of the gospel, the mystery that, in the church, Gentiles are on equal footing with their Jewish brothers and sisters. We experience his excitement for the church and its cosmic mission. We listen in as he prays, praising God for expressing His grace through the church.

In short, we are inspired to join Paul in his passion for the gospel.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 5.

## Paul: Imprisoned Apostle to the Gentiles

**Read** Ephesians 3. As you do so, identify one or two main themes. What major points does Paul make?

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Ephesians 3 displays an interesting structure. Paul begins the chapter with these words: “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NKJV*). Then, he breaks off for what turns out to be a lengthy digression focused on his work as apostle to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:2–13*). After the aside, he signals a return to his original train of thought by repeating the phrase “For this reason” (*Eph. 3:14, NKJV*), with verses 14–21 providing his interrupted prayer report.

In Ephesians 3:1, Paul identifies himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus” (*NKJV*), his way of arguing that though he may reside in Roman captivity and appear to be under the authority of the Roman Empire, there is a deeper, divine purpose being worked out in his life. He is not the prisoner of Rome but “the prisoner of Christ Jesus”! (*compare Eph. 4:1*).

Paul’s mention of his “suffering” (*Eph. 3:13, ESV*), and his later mention of his chains (*Eph. 6:20, ESV*), suggest that he is not under relatively comfortable house arrest (*compare Acts 28:16*) but is in prison. Being in prison in the first century and in a Roman dungeon was especially challenging. The Roman Empire did not run well-organized prisons with sanitary facilities and regular meal service. In fact, the empire had little need for prisons since incarceration was not used as a means of punishment. People were placed in prison only while they awaited trial or execution. Prisoners were expected to provide for themselves and were dependent on relatives and friends to supply food and other needs.

Paul’s worries perhaps center on the emotional impact of his imprisonment on believers, since being a prisoner was an extreme social disgrace in the context of an honor-shame culture. He might fear that some will ask, “How can Paul be the apostle and messenger of the exalted Christ and be a despised prisoner?” So, he reframes his imprisonment, helping believers to see it as part of God’s plan. He is suffering for them (“suffering for you,” *ESV*), and what appears to be a source of shame will in fact turn out to be for their “glory” (*Eph. 3:13*).

**How can we learn to trust God and His ways amid what can be very trying circumstances?**

## The Long-Hidden Mystery of the Gospel

**What** is the mystery that has been entrusted to Paul? *Eph. 3:1–6*.

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As you study Ephesians 3:1–6, note the following:

First, Paul writes this part of the letter specifically to Gentile believers in the house churches of Ephesus (*Eph. 3:1*).

Second, Paul claims to be the recipient of something he labels “the stewardship of God’s grace,” given to him “for you,” for Gentile believers (*Eph. 3:2, ESV*). This stewardship, or this ministry of grace, is Paul’s way of describing the commission given to him to preach the gospel (“God’s grace”) to the Gentiles (*compare Eph. 3:7, 8, ESV*).

Third, Paul claims that a mystery has been revealed to him, a topic he has already written about in the letter (*see especially Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), the “mystery of Christ” (*Eph. 3:3, 4*). Paul does not wish to be understood as the inventor of the gospel, but he does lay claim to a God-given ministry to proclaim it.

Fourth, Paul is not alone in having received advanced revelation about this *mystery*, as the Spirit has also revealed it to Christ’s “holy apostles and prophets” in a way that surpasses the revelation of God’s plan to earlier generations (*Eph. 3:5*). The term *prophets* here probably refers to those possessing and exercising the gift of prophecy among early Christian house churches rather than the prophets of the Old Testament. The *mystery*, which was once hidden, has now become what we might call an “open secret.”

Finally, he declares: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, ESV*).

Paul is passionate about the gospel and especially about the way it is expressed in the church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. These two groups have become the building blocks of God’s new community, His new brand of humanity, the church (*see Eph. 2:14–16*). We could say they are now transformed from being enemies to being “co-heirs,” “co-bodied” (included in a single body, the body of Christ), and “co-partakers” of the gospel promise (*see Eph. 3:6*).

**What, if any, attitudes, maybe even below the surface, might you hold that contradict the inclusiveness taught by the gospel? How do you rid yourself of these?**

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## The Church: Revealer of God's Wisdom

**What** does Paul say about God and the actions of God in Ephesians 3:7–13?

Paul again lays claim to being a “minister” through “the gift of God’s grace” (*Eph. 3:7, ESV; compare Eph. 3:1, 2*). This gift, like the gospel itself, is not granted because of the worth of the recipient, but through God’s grace. Paul underlines this point by describing himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*).

There is an interesting progression in Paul’s self-understanding that is discernible as we move through Paul’s letters in the order they were written. Early on, he lays claim to his status as a divinely appointed apostle (*Gal. 1:1*). Later, though, he introduces himself as “the least of the apostles” and “not worthy to be called an apostle” (*1 Cor. 15:9, NKJV*). Here in Ephesians he sees himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*). Finally, he describes himself as the “chief” (*NKJV*) or “worst” of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15, NIV*).

Perhaps this line of thinking here by Paul can help explain this famous quote by Ellen G. White: “The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

Paul then continues. In Ephesians 3:10, he writes: “to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*). Who are the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*) mentioned here? How does the church announce God’s “manifold” or multifaceted wisdom to them? Though Ephesians 3:10 does not describe the nature of the powers, it seems best to take them as the evil ones described in more detail in Ephesians 6:11, 12. If so, the composition of the church, unifying Jews and Gentiles as once very divided parts of humankind, becomes a ringing announcement to these demonic “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” of God’s plan for the future, “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*). They are put on notice that God’s plan is underway and their doom assured. The very nature of a unified church signals their ultimate defeat.

**If your own congregation took seriously Paul’s “job description” of the church in Ephesians 3:10, how might it change the way you and your fellow church members relate to each other?**



## Christ, Dwelling in Your Heart

**Compare** Paul's earlier prayer request, Ephesians 1:16–19, with his plea for believers in Ephesians 3:14–19. In what ways are the two requests similar?

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Behind the English translations of Ephesians 3:14, 15 is an important play on words. When Paul says that he bows before “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (*ESV*), he is exploring the phonetic connection between the Greek word for *Father*, *patēr*, and the Greek term for *family*, *patria*. In Ephesians, Paul celebrates the comprehensive nature of God’s plan of salvation, which involves all things (*Eph. 1:9, 10*) for all time (*Eph. 1:21*). And here he lays claim to “every family in heaven and on earth” as belonging to “the Father.” Every family (*patria*) takes its name from the Father (*patēr*). This is very good news!

Ponder this thought: Your family, despite its imperfections and failings, belongs to God. Your family is not in the cruel grip of fate but in God’s caring hands. God loves imperfect families. They bear the divine name. They carry the mark of His ownership.

In Ephesians 3:16–19, Paul asks God to grant believers an abundant spiritual experience marked by inner strength through the Spirit’s presence (*Eph. 3:16*), intimacy with Christ, who is also portrayed as dwelling within (*Eph. 3:17*), and a settled, secure spiritual identity (“rooted and grounded in love,” *Eph. 3:17, ESV*).

As Paul seeks to offer praise to God for the expansive reach of blessings offered to believers, he includes not three dimensions but four—“breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*). He does not clearly identify to what these dimensions apply, though they obviously describe the vast size of something important. This leaves an interesting puzzle for Bible students. Do these dimensions describe God’s wisdom (*compare Job 11:5–9*, which uses four dimensions), God’s power (*compare Eph. 3:16, 17*), or, perhaps, the spiritual temple of Ephesians 2:19–22 (*compare Ezek. 43:13–16*, which uses four dimensions; *Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2*)? It may be best to see these four dimensions as describing the immensity of “the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19*), viewing the phrase “to comprehend . . . the breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*) as parallel to the next phrase, “to know the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19, ESV; compare Rom. 8:35–39*). However we see his words, they are good news.

## Glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus

**Paul** concludes his prayer report with a doxology, a brief, poetic statement of praise to God. For what does he praise God? *Eph. 3:20, 21.*

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Paul has been recording his prayers for believers (*Eph. 3:14–19*). Now he prays directly and powerfully. Paul's doxology raises two questions: 1. Does the passage inappropriately elevate the church, placing it on a par with Christ, in the phrase "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus" (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*)? While Paul is highly interested in the church in Ephesians, it is clear that Christ is the Savior of the church since it is Christ who dwells in the hearts of believers (*Eph. 3:17*). In the doxology, Paul praises God for the salvation offered to the church through Christ Jesus.

2. Does the phrase "throughout all generations, forever and ever" (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*) portray an unending, earthbound future for the church, with the return of Christ put on hold? Ephesians exhibits a robust expectation for the future. For example, Ephesians 4:30 looks toward "the day of redemption" (*ESV*). Also, believers will experience Christ's limitless, sovereign power in "the age to come" (*Eph. 1:21, NRSV*). Paul's doxology should be read as a celebration of Christ's unending power exercised on behalf of believers.

Looking back over Paul's second prayer report (*Eph. 3:14–21; compare Eph. 1:15–23*), we see Paul finding strength in the cosmic scope of the Father's care (*Eph. 3:14, 15*), the ready availability of the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 3:16*), the partnership of Christ Himself (*Eph. 3:17*), and the immeasurability of the limitless love of Christ (*Eph. 3:18, 19*). This is so true that he imagines believers being filled "with all the fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:19, ESV*) and celebrates these spiritual realities in praise, again marveling at the abundance of God's power on offer to the saints (*Eph. 3:20, 21*).

Whenever we feel the press of problems, temptations, or doubts, we may turn to this buoyant account of Paul's prayers. The imprisoned apostle raises our vision to the grand horizon of God's purposes and grace, reminding us that, whatever our current circumstances, we are participants in God's ultimate plan (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and His power is at work in us.

**What blessings from God are especially valuable to you? Practice composing a prayer of praise in order to praise God for them.**

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**Further Thought:** Ellen G. White, “Modern Revivals,” in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 461–478.

“How can we harmonize our dwarfed spiritual condition with the presentation of our text [*Eph. 3:14–19*] that describes the fullness of knowledge it is our privilege to possess? How can Heaven look upon us, who have had every spiritual and temporal advantage that we might grow in grace, when we have not improved our opportunities? The apostle did not write these words to tantalize us, to deceive us, or to raise our expectations only to have them disappointed in our experience. He wrote these words to show us what we may and must be, if we would be heirs of the kingdom of God. How can we be laborers together with God, if we have a dwarfed experience? We have a knowledge of the Christian’s privilege, and should seek for that deep, spiritual understanding in the things of God that the Lord has desired us to have.

“Do we really believe the Bible? Do we really believe that we may attain to the knowledge of God that is presented before us in this text? Do we believe every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God? Do we believe the words that have been spoken by prophets and apostles, by Jesus Christ, who is the author of all light and blessing, and in whom dwelleth all richness and fullness? Do we really believe in God, and in his Son?”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 1, 1889.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Compare Paul’s doxology in Ephesians 3:20, 21 to other doxologies in the New Testament—*Rom. 11:33–36; Rom. 16:25–27; Phil. 4:20; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 24, 25*. What themes or ideas move through these passages? How might we adopt the attitude of praise and worship they illustrate?
- ❷ Compare Paul’s four uses of the Greek word *plēroma* (“fullness”) in Ephesians (*Eph. 1:10, 23; Eph. 3:19; Eph. 4:13*). Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?
- ❸ Of all the actions of God that Paul praises in Ephesians 3, which is most inspiring to you? Why?
- ❹ Paul concludes the first half of Ephesians just as he began it (*Eph. 1:3–21*), employing the language of prayer and praise. He exults in God’s power, present in the lives of believers through Christ and the Spirit (*Eph. 3:16–21*). How can we, as Ellen G. White wrote above, better experience this power in our lives?

# The Unified Body of Christ



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 4:1–16; Phil. 2:3; Ps. 68:18; Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–30; Isa. 5:4.*

**Memory Text:** “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (*Ephesians 4:11, 12, ESV*).

One of Aesop's fables is called “The Belly and the Feet.” It goes like this: “The belly and the feet were arguing about their importance, and when the feet kept saying that they were so much stronger that they even carried the stomach around, the stomach replied, ‘But, my good friends, if I didn't take in food, you wouldn't be able to carry anything.’ ”—Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop Without Morals* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 148.

Paul, however, used the human body to make a spiritual point. For Paul, the human body—and the church as the body of Christ—is composed of various parts with differing abilities, all of which must work together for the body to be healthy. In *Ephesians 4:1–16*, Paul redeploys the body metaphor that he used so effectively earlier (*Rom. 12:3–8, 1 Cor. 12:12–31*). Christ is now the Head of the body, supplying the body with “gifted” people who help unify the body, with each part—each church member—contributing its abilities to the whole.

Paul's picture of a healthy, unified body helps us understand God's goal for us: to be parts of a fruitful church united in Christ.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 12.

## The Unity of the Spirit

**Read** Ephesians 4:1–16. How does Paul encourage believers to nurture the unity of the church?

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Paul begins the second half of Ephesians (chapters 4–6) with a stirring call to unity, but in two major parts. First, in Ephesians 4:1–6 he asks believers to nurture “the unity of the Spirit” by exhibiting unity-building virtues (*Eph. 4:1–3*), a call he supports with a poetic list of seven “ones” (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Second, in Ephesians 4:7–16, Paul identifies the victorious, exalted Jesus as the Source of grace in people who lead in sharing the gospel (*Eph. 4:7–10*) and describes how they, together with all church members, contribute to the health, growth, and unity of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:11–16*).

As the chapter begins, Paul invites Christians to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (*Eph. 4:1, ESV*). He used the verb *walk* in the figurative sense of *to behave*, or *to live* (see *Eph. 2:2, 10; Eph. 4:17; Eph. 5:2, 8, 15*). When Paul refers to their calling, he refers to the call to Christian faith (*Eph. 1:18; Eph. 2:4–6, 13*). Paul urges believers to practice a unifying behavior that reflects God’s ultimate plan (*Eph. 4:9, 10*). He begins that emphasis here with his call to practice virtues that lead to unity (*Eph. 4:1–3*), such as humility, gentleness, and patience.

Let’s look at each term.

Paul elsewhere explains the term *humility*, in Ephesians 4:2 (*ESV*; “lowliness” in *NKJV*), by adding the idea to “count others more significant than yourselves” (*Phil. 2:3, ESV*). Humility, then, may be understood not as a negative virtue of self-deprecation (see *Col. 2:18, 23*) but as a positive one of appreciating and serving others.

*Gentleness* (*Eph. 4:2, ESV, NKJV*) may be explained as “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance” and also means “courtesy, considerateness, meekness.”—Frederick Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 861.

Finally, *patience* (*ESV*; compare “longsuffering,” *NKJV*) is being able to bear up under provocation or trials. These qualities, then, all gather around the theme of turning away from self-importance and, instead, focusing on the value of others.

***Humility, gentleness, patience.* Think about how these attributes would help unify us as a people. How do we learn to cultivate these virtues?**

## Together as One in the One

**What** seven “ones” does Paul cite in support of his theme of the unity of the church? What point is he seeking to make with this list? *Eph. 4:4–6*.

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Paul’s list of seven “ones” has a poetic feel to it and may echo a hymn of affirmation used in Ephesus. The list begins by mentioning two “ones” together: “There is one body” (referring to the church as the body of Christ, *Eph. 4:12, 16; Eph. 1:23; Eph. 5:23, 29, 30*) and “one Spirit” (*Eph. 4:4*). The third one is the “one hope of your calling” (*Eph. 4:4; compare Eph. 4:1*).

The list then offers three more elements, “one Lord” (a reference to Christ), “one faith” (meaning the content of what Christians believe, *Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:23; Col. 2:7; Gal. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1, 6*), and “one baptism” (*compare Eph. 5:26*) before concluding with an extended description of God as “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all, and in all” (*Eph. 4:6, ESV*).

What is Paul communicating through this poetic description of God the Father? By virtue of His being “Father of all,” God is the Creator. The rest of the sentence describes how, once the world is created, God relates to “all things,” to everything that He made. Paul is not dabbling in the heresies of pantheism (which identifies nature with God), or panentheism (which argues that the world is included in God’s being, though it does not exhaust that being). He is rather proclaiming the transcendence (“who is over all”), active rule (“who is . . . through all”), and immanence (“who is . . . in all”) of God.

Note carefully two ideas about the unity of the church (*Eph. 4:1–6*). First, unity is a spiritual fact, rooted in these seven “ones,” a reality to be celebrated (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Second, this unity requires our zeal to nurture and grow it (*Eph. 4:3*). There will often be cause to weep at our failings in actualizing this unity. However, whatever our failings, we should rejoice in the work of God-in-Christ in unifying the church, rejoicing in the theological reality of the “unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3*). Doing so will empower us to return to the hard work of advancing this unity but with fresh conviction that in doing so we are accomplishing God’s own work.

**Read again Ephesians 4:4–6. How does it make you feel? How should it make you feel, knowing what it says about our unity in and with God through Christ?**

## The Exalted Christ, Giver of Gifts

**“However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ. That is why the Scriptures say,**

**‘When he ascended to the heights,**

**he led a crowd of captives**

**and gave gifts to his people.’**

**“Notice that it says ‘he ascended.’ This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself” (*Eph. 4:7–10, NLT*). What is happening here, and what is Paul’s point in these verses?**

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Paul here quoted Psalm 68:18, which reads: “When you ascended to the heights, you led a crowd of captives. You received gifts from the people, even from those who rebelled against you” (*NLT*). Psalm 68:18 portrays the Lord, Yahweh, as a conquering general who, having conquered His enemies, ascends the hill on which His capital city is built, with the captives of battle in His train (*see Ps. 68:1, 2*). He then receives tribute (“received gifts”) from His conquered foes (noting that Paul adjusts this imagery to the exalted Christ “giving gifts,” based on the wider context of the psalm; *see Ps. 68:35*).

If we follow the order of Psalm 68:18, the ascent—Christ’s ascension to heaven (*Eph. 1:21–23*)—occurs first, followed by the *descent* in which the risen, exalted Jesus gives gifts and fills all things. This is Paul’s way of depicting the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit (*see Acts 2*). This view is confirmed by Ephesians 4:11, 12, which identify the *gifts* provided by the exalted Jesus as gifts of the Spirit.

“Christ ascended on high, leading captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. When, after Christ’s ascension, the Spirit came down as promised, like a rushing, mighty wind, filling the whole place where the disciples were assembled, what was the effect? Thousands were converted in a day.”—Ellen G. White, *Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 158.

**However deep these few verses in Ephesians may be, how can we learn to draw comfort from what they show Christ has done for us and will do, especially when He will fill “all things everywhere with himself” (*Eph. 1:23, NLT*)?**

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## Gifts of the Exalted Jesus

**Drawing** on Psalm 68:18, Paul has just described the risen, exalted, conquering Jesus as giving gifts to His people from on high. What “gifts” does the exalted Jesus give, and for what purpose? *Eph. 4:11–13*.

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Paul identifies four groups of “gifted” people as part of the treasure trove of the exalted Jesus that He gives to His church: (1) apostles; (2) prophets; (3) evangelists; (4) shepherds (*ESV*) and teachers (the structure of the Greek phrase suggests these are a single group). Christ gives these gifts to accomplish important work: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, ESV*) and “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, ESV*).

This last point was of special importance to early Adventists, who were reflecting on the spiritual gifts of Ellen G. White. Does the Bible validate the functioning of the gift of prophecy in the church only during the time of the apostles? Or does the gift continue until the return of Christ? The early Adventists found their answer in Ephesians 4:13 and shared it through a story about the captain of a ship who was bound to follow the instructions provided for a voyage. As the ship neared port, the captain found that the instructions informed him that a pilot would come on board to help guide the vessel. To remain true to the original instructions, he must allow the pilot to board and obey the further guidance offered. “Who now heed that original book of directions? Those who reject the pilot, or those who receive him, as that book instructs them? Judge ye.”—Uriah Smith, “Do We Discard the Bible by Endorsing the Visions?” *Review and Herald*, January 13, 1863, p. 52.

We should be careful when we identify “shepherds” (or “pastors”), “teachers,” and “evangelists,” since we think of these positions within our own context and time. As far as we are able to determine, in Paul’s day these would all have been lay leaders who were serving the house churches of Ephesus (*compare 1 Pet. 2:9, Acts 2:46, Acts 12:12*).

**Read Isaiah 5:4: “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?” (NKJV). Think about this verse in the context of what God has given us in the ministry of Ellen G. White. How does it apply?**

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## Growing Up Into Christ

**What** danger threatens the Christlike maturity of the church? *Eph. 4:14.*

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Paul perceives an environment not unlike our own in which various ideas, such as “every wind of doctrine” and “deceitful schemes” (*ESV*), are thrust upon believers. He uses three sets of images to describe the dangers of wayward theology: (1) the immaturity of childhood, “so that we may no longer be children” (*ESV*); (2) danger on the high seas, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (*ESV*); and (3) being swindled by clever people who, like gamblers, practice sleight of hand. Paul uses figuratively the Greek word *kubeia* (“dice playing”) to mean “cunning” (*ESV*) or “trickery” (*NKJV*).

Paul believes divisiveness to be an important mark of error: That which nourishes and grows the body and helps it hold together is good while that which depletes and divides it is evil. By turning from the divisive teaching and to that of tested and trusted teachers (*Eph. 4:11*), they will advance toward true Christian maturity and play effective roles in the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:12, 13; compare Eph. 4:15, 16*).

**In** what ways does a healthy church function like a healthy body? *Eph. 4:15, 16.*

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In Ephesians 4:1–16, Paul advocates for the unity of the church and recruits the addressees to foster it actively. While unity is a theological certainty (*Eph. 4:4–6*), it does require our hard work (*Eph. 4:3*). One way we foster unity is by being active “parts” of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:7–16*). Each of us is a part of the body and should contribute to its health and growth (*Eph. 4:7, 16*). We all should also benefit from the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (*Eph. 4:11*). These, like ligaments, tendons, and “every joint” (*Eph. 4:16, ESV*), have a unifying function, helping us grow up together into Christ, who is the head of the body (*Eph. 4:13, 15*).

**What are some of the “winds of doctrine” blowing through our church today, and how can we stand firm against them? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

**Further Thought:** Two notes help to expand our study of Ephesians 4:7–10:

1. *Translating Ephesians 4:9.* Some translations indicate that the descent occurs before the ascent (e.g., *NKJV*, “He also first descended”; *KJV*, *RSV*, *ESV*, *NASB*). Other translations follow the Greek text more closely, leaving the issue of the timing of the ascent and descent open (e.g., *NIV*, “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” *ASV*, *HCSB*, *LEB*, *NLT*), which allows for the view, expressed in Tuesday’s study, that the narrative order of Psalm 68:18 should be followed, with Christ’s exaltation to heaven (the “ascent”) occurring first, followed by His “descent” in the Spirit.

2. *Leading captivity captive.* In quoting Psalm 68:18 from the Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), Paul uses a phrase in Ephesians 4:8 that reads literally, “he took captive captivity” (reflected in some translations, e.g., *KJV*, *NKJV*, *NRSV*), but which is widely affirmed to mean, “he took as prisoners a group of captives” (reflected in the *ESV*, *NASB*, *NIV*, etc.). Seventh-day Adventists have often understood the phrase to refer to Christ’s act of taking back with Him to heaven, at His ascension, those raised in a special resurrection at the time of His own resurrection (*Matt.* 27:51–53). These constitute a “wave sheaf,” firstfruits of the redeemed, that He presents to the Father on His return to the courts of heaven (see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1022; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 834; compare *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 785, 786). Alternatively, in line with Colossians 2:15, the passage could be taken as a picture of Christ’s conquest over His foes—Satan and his evil angels—who are portrayed as defeated captives.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Compare the list of “spiritual gifts” in Ephesians 4:11 with the lists in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–30; Romans 12:4–8; and 1 Peter 4:10, 11. What differences and similarities do you observe?
- ❷ In class, talk about some of the “winds of doctrine” blowing in the church today. Notice how Paul says that we should not be blown about by these winds. What are specific ways that we can help protect ourselves, and others in the church, from the damage that these winds can inflict upon us?
- ❸ Paul stresses through Ephesians the theme of “unity.” But do we seek unity at all costs? In other words, at what point can the desire for unity become counterproductive? Discuss.

# Christ-Shaped Lives *and* Spirit-Inspired Speech



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:1–17; Zech. 3:3–5; Zech. 8:16; Isa. 63:10; Rom. 8:16, 26, 27.*

**Memory Text:** “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Ephesians 4:22–24, NIV*).

Jose Antonio lived on the streets of Palma, Spain, as a homeless man for years. With gray, straggly hair and beard, Jose looked older than his 57 years. One day, Salva Garcia, the owner of a hair salon, approached Jose and proposed a complete makeover.

With Jose in the salon chair, a hardworking team cut, dyed, and styled the tangled bundles of hair and beard. Next, Jose then got new stylish clothes. Then came the reveal! As Jose sat in front of a mirror, tears came. “Is this me? I’m so different; no one is going to recognize me!” Later he would add, “It wasn’t just a change of looks. It changed my life.”

In *Ephesians 4:17–32*, Paul argues that believers have experienced a complete transformation. They have taken off their old selves and have embraced their new identity. Somewhat like Jose’s change, though, this is no mere external transformation. It includes being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” (*Eph. 4:23, ESV*), bringing into the life “true righteousness and holiness” (*Eph. 4:24, ESV*). This is the ultimate makeover.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 19.

## The Downward Spiral of Sin

**Compare** Ephesians 4:17–32 with Colossians 3:1–17. How does Paul advocate for believers to live in a way that encourages the unity of the church?

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In the prior section, Ephesians 4:1–16, Paul’s theme was the unity of the church. When we compare Ephesians 4:1 and Ephesians 4:17, we note how similar these two exhortations are about how to *walk* or to live. This resemblance suggests that Paul addresses the same theme—unity and the lifestyle that supports it—but from a new and initially more negative vantage point.

In Ephesians 4:17–24, Paul contrasts Gentile lifestyle, which he regards as undermining unity (*Eph. 4:17–19*), with truly Christian patterns of life that nourish it (*Eph. 4:20–24*). As we read Paul’s sharp critique of the depraved, Gentile lifestyle, we should recall his conviction that Gentiles are redeemed by God through Christ and offered full partnership in the people of God (*Eph. 2:11–22, Eph. 3:1–13*). In Ephesians 4:17–19, then, he is offering a limited and negative description of “Gentiles in the flesh” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Paul is not just concerned about specific sins or behaviors exhibited by Gentiles. He is concerned about a pattern of behavior that they exhibit, a downward trajectory of living in the grip of sin. At the heart of Ephesians 4:17–19 is a portrait of a calloused spirituality: “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God” (*Eph. 4:17, 18, NKJV*). This calloused spirituality is the source of the darkened understanding highlighted at the beginning of the passage (“because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous,” *Eph. 4:18, 19, ESV*) and the depraved sexual practice underlined at its end (“and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity,” *Eph. 4:19, ESV*). Alienated from God, they don’t know how to live, and separated from His saving grace, they continue in a downward spiral of sin and depravity.

**What has been your own experience with the power of sin to continue to drag a person downward into even more sin?**

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## A Dramatic Change of Clothing

**In** retelling the story of the conversion of his audience, what essential main point is Paul getting across to them? *Eph. 4:20–24*.

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Having described their former, Gentile existence (*Eph. 4:17–19*), Paul does not say, “That is not the way you learned about Christ.” Instead, he exclaims, “That is not the way you learned Christ!” (*Eph. 4:20, ESV*). Noting that the addressees “heard Him” [Christ] (*NKJV*), and were taught “in him” (*Eph. 4:21, ESV*) or “by Him” (*NKJV*), Paul further advocates the adoption of a Christ-shaped life with the phrase “as the truth is in Jesus” (*Eph. 4:21*). For Paul, coming to faith centers on a personal connection with Christ, one so vivid and real that it may be described as “learning Christ.” We acknowledge that the risen and exalted Jesus is alive and present with us. We are shaped by His teachings and example and exercise loyalty to Him as our living Lord. We open our lives to His active guidance and direction through Spirit and Word.

Paul tells us that the adoption of a Christ-shaped life requires three processes, which he expresses through clothing imagery: (1) to “put off” or turn away from the old way of life (*Eph. 4:22*); (2) to experience inner renewal (*Eph. 4:23*); and (3) to “put on” the new, Godlike pattern of life (*Eph. 4:24*). Paul’s metaphor reflects the use of clothing in the Old Testament as a symbol for both sinfulness (e.g., *Ps. 73:6; Zech. 3:3, 4; Mal. 2:16*) and salvation (e.g., *Isa. 61:10; Ezek. 16:8; Zech. 3:4, 5*).

In ancient times, men wore a knee-length tunic as an undergarment and a cloak or mantle to offer protection from the sun. Similarly, women wore a tunic and a robe. The cultures reflected in the Bible were subsistence ones. Garments were precious and expensive and were kept for a long time. It would have been unusual to own more than one set of clothing. The quality and style of those garments signaled identity and status markers about the wearer. To change one’s clothes, exchanging one set of clothes for another, was an unusual and important event (rather than the trifling occurrence it is in many cultures today). Paul imagines the change in life to be as noticeable as exchanging one set of clothing for another would have been in this first-century context.

**What is the difference, the *crucial* difference, between learning about Christ and learning to know Christ?**

## Unity-Building, Grace-Filled Speech

**Which** of Paul's words of counsel with regard to the use of speech among believers is the most important to you just now? Why? *Eph. 4:25–29.*

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Paul repeatedly uses an interesting structure in Ephesians 4:25–32, which is illustrated by Ephesians 4:25 (*NKJV*): a negative command (“putting away lying”); a positive command next (“‘let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor’ ”); and then a rationale (“for we are members of one another,” which seems to mean “because we are members of one body and so related to one another as parts of that one body”). Paul’s exhortation to “speak truth” is not an invitation to confront other church members with a tactless recitation of facts. Paul alludes to Zechariah 8:16, which exhorts speaking the truth as a way of fostering peace.

Since in Ephesians 4:31 Paul banishes anger and angry speech, his words in Ephesians 4:26 provide no permission to exercise anger within the congregation. Rather, Paul concedes the possibility of anger, while limiting its expression with the sense, “Should you become angry, do not allow it to bear fruit in full blown sin.”

Paul appears to interrupt his theme of speech with a negative command about thieves: “Let the thief no longer steal” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Positively, the thief is to “labor, doing honest work with his own hands” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV; see also 1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Thess. 4:11*) based on the rationale, “so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Perhaps Paul includes this word about thieves here because of the connection between theft and deceptive speech as illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11. Paul’s faith in Christ’s transforming power is so strong that he envisions thieves becoming benefactors!

Paul then commands, “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth” (*Eph. 4:29, NKJV*), which describes a destructive word making its seemingly unstoppable way toward the lips to do its damaging work. Positively, Paul imagines any negative expression not being just stopped, but replaced by a statement that exhibits three criteria: It (1) “is good for building up,” (2) “fits the occasion,” and (3) gives “grace to those who hear” (*Eph. 4:29, ESV*). If only all our words could be like that!

## The Holy Spirit in the Believer's Life

**In** discussing sins of speech within the Christian community, what exhortation does Paul share about the presence of the Holy Spirit with believers? *Eph. 4:30*.

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Paul simultaneously offers a daunting warning and a heartwarming promise. Our sins against one another in the church are not minor misdeeds with little consequence: what grieves the Holy Spirit is our misuse of God's gift of speech to tear down others (*Eph. 4:25–27, 29, 31, 32*). That Paul echoes Isaiah 63:10 underlines the serious warning: “But they [Israel] rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them” (*ESV*).

In a reassuring promise, Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit seals believers from the day they accepted Christ (*Eph. 1:13, 14*) until “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*). The Spirit's relationship with the believer is not fragile but durable. When believers disregard the indwelling presence of the Spirit by weaponizing God's gift of speech, the Spirit is not said to leave but to grieve. The Spirit intends to remain present with believers, marking them as owned and protected by God, until Christ's return.

Paul underlines the full divinity of the Spirit as “the Holy Spirit of God” and highlights the *personhood* of the Spirit by portraying the Holy Spirit as *grieving*. (See also *Rom. 8:16, 26, 27; 1 Cor. 2:10, 13; 1 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 5:17, 18*.)

We must tread with care in discussing the mystery of the Godhead. The Spirit is both One with and distinct from the Father and the Son. “The Spirit has His own will and chooses accordingly. He can be grieved and blasphemed against. Such expressions are not fit for a mere power or influence but are characteristics of a person. Is the Spirit then a person just like you and me? No, we use limited human terminology to describe the divine, and the Spirit is what human beings can never be.”—Paul Petersen, *God in 3 Persons—In the New Testament* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), p. 20.

**It is “the Holy Spirit of God” who lives in such intimate contact with us that our actions are said to affect Him. We share life with a member of the Godhead committed to us in a durable relationship that seals us until the end of time. What should be our faith response to this amazing truth?**

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## Kindness (Not Bitterness)

By referring to “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*), Paul has just invited his readers to consider their uses of speech in the context of Christ’s second coming. Ephesians 4:31, 32, then, may be understood as addressing the use of speech as we approach that grand event.

**In the light of Christ’s return, what attitudes and behaviors, related to speech, should be discarded? What attitudes and behaviors should be embraced? *Eph. 4:31, 32.***

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In the final exhortation of Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul again provides a negative command, this one identifying six vices that are to “be put away from you” (*Eph. 4:31*); a positive command to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (*Eph. 4:32*), and a rationale. Believers are to forgive one another “even as God in Christ forgave you” (*Eph. 4:32, NKJV*). The list of six vices begins and ends with general, all-encompassing terms, “all bitterness” and “all malice.” In between come four additional terms: “wrath,” “anger,” “clamor,” and “slander” (*Eph. 4:31, ESV*).

The last of these translates the Greek word *blasphemia*, which English has borrowed as a technical term for demeaning speech against God. However, the Greek term identifies speech that defames either God or other humans as “slander” or “evil speaking.” In the list, attitudes (bitterness, wrath, anger) seem to boil over into angry speech (clamor, slander). In essence, Paul demilitarizes Christian speech. The attitudes that drive angry speech and the rhetorical strategies that employ it are to be removed from the Christian’s arsenal. Christian community will flourish and unity of the church be fostered (*compare Eph. 4:1–16*) only where these things are laid aside.

Evil speech, though, is not so much to be suppressed as replaced. Our conversations and actions among the family of Christ—and beyond it, as well—are not to grow out of anger but are to be motivated by kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness based on the highest standard of all, the forgiveness that God has extended to us in Christ (*Eph. 4:32*). Paul presents “vertical forgiveness” (offered by God to us) as the model for “horizontal forgiveness” (that which we offer to each other; *compare Col. 3:13; Matt. 6:12, 14, 15*).

**Think about the power of your words. How can you use them to be uplifting, encouraging, and faith-building?**

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**Further Thought:** “Let your conversation be of such a nature that you will have no need of repentance. ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’ . . . If you have love in your heart, you will seek to establish and build up your brother in the most holy faith. If a word is dropped that is detrimental to the character of your friend or brother, do not encourage this evil-speaking. It is the work of the enemy. Kindly remind the speaker that the word of God forbids that kind of conversation.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 5, 1888.

How would your congregation change if you and each member were to take and live a pledge consisting of such statements as the following?

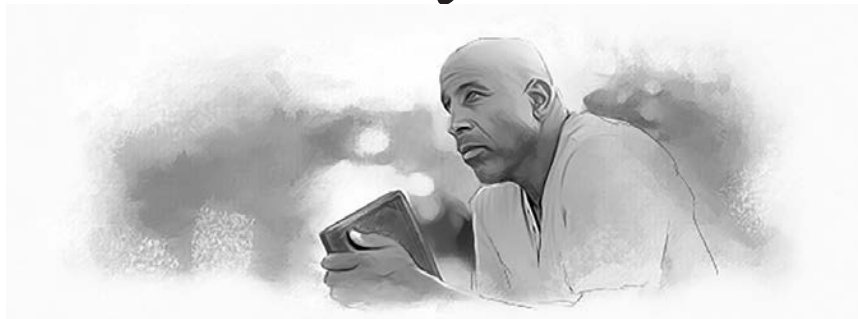
1. I wish for my influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church family and beyond to be positive, uplifting, faith-building, and morale-boosting (*Eph. 4:29*).
2. Recalling Christ’s calls for unity and love, I will expend more energy affirming those doing and saying things I believe to be good than in pointing out the failings of those I believe to be wrong (*John 13:34, 35; John 17:20–23; Eph. 4:1–6; 1 Thess. 5:9–11*).
3. When I do disagree with someone, I will make my respect for my fellow believer clear. I will assume his or her integrity and commitment to Christ. I will offer my differing opinion gently, not stridently (*Eph. 4:31, 32*).
4. I will live joyfully, looking for every opportunity to build up and affirm my fellow church members, as I await the return of Christ (*Eph. 4:29, 30; Gal. 6:2; Heb. 10:24, 25*).

## Discussion Questions:

**①** Review the 11 times in Ephesians that Paul describes the three members of the Godhead as working closely together for the salvation of humankind. How does this repeated emphasis inform our understanding of the Godhead? *Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:11–18, Eph. 2:19–22, Eph. 3:1–13, Eph. 3:14–19, Eph. 4:4–6, Eph. 4:17–24, Eph. 4:25–32, Eph. 5:15–20, Eph. 6:10–20 (where “the Lord,” Eph. 6:10, refers to Christ).*

**②** How does Paul’s counsel about Christian speech (*Eph. 4:25–32*) apply in the age of “computer-mediated communication,” which is too often used for cyberbullying and anonymous, online character assassination?

# Living Wisely



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 5:1–20, 1 Cor. 5:1–11, Rev. 16:1–16, Col. 4:5, Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35, Acts 16:25.*

**Memory Text:** “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Ephesians 5:15–17, ESV*).

Not long ago a crystal jug was placed on auction in the United Kingdom. The auctioneers described it as a “nineteenth-century French, claret jug,” estimating its worth at US\$200. Two perceptive bidders recognized the jug as an extremely rare, Islamic ewer. Its true, appraised worth? £5 million (about US\$6.5 million). What allowed that bidder to walk away with such a bargain? The bidder knew something that the auctioneer did not: the true value of the jug.

In *Ephesians 5:1–20*, Paul contrasts what pagans and believers valued. Pagans valued a racy story (*Eph. 5:4*), a drunken party (*Eph. 5:18*), and debauched sex (*Eph. 5:3, 5*) as the great treasures of life. Believers, though, know an ultimate day of appraisal is coming, when the true value of all things will become apparent (*Eph. 5:5, 6*). Instead of placing their bid on partying and drunkenness, they treasure, among other things, “all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*) in Christ. Paul, thus, urges them to snap up the bargains found in Christ as they live (as we all do) on the threshold of eternity (*Eph. 5:15–17*).

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 26.

## “Instead Let There Be Thanksgiving”

**In** what sense does Paul intend believers to be “imitators of God”? See *Ephesians 5:1, 2, NKJV*.

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Paul urges the believers in Ephesus to walk in love, a call important to this section (*see Eph. 5:8, 15*). This “walking in love” (*see Eph. 5:2*) is to be modeled after Christ’s own love for us (*compare Eph. 4:32*), expressed in His atoning sacrifice. Paul affirms four things about that sacrifice: (1) It is motivated by both the love of God the Father (*Eph. 5:1*) and of Christ Himself (*Eph. 5:2*); (2) it is substitutionary, with Christ dying in our place. Christ is no passive victim but gave Himself up for us; (3) under the imagery of the Old Testament sanctuary service, Christ’s death is also a sacrifice, which is made to God; and (4) the sacrifice is accepted by God since it is “a fragrant offering” (*Eph. 5:2, ESV; compare Exod. 29:18, Lev. 2:9, Phil. 4:18*).

Ephesians 5:3–5 then introduces a section expressing concern for sexual ethics. The young converts in Ephesus are in danger of reversing their Christian calling and being drawn back into sexual behavior that would negate their Christian witness (*compare 1 Cor. 5:1–11, 1 Cor. 6:12–20, 2 Cor. 12:21*).

On the one hand, the Greco-Roman world of the first century exhibited the moral corruption and debauchery described elsewhere in the New Testament (*see 1 Cor. 6:9, Gal. 5:19, Eph. 4:17–19, Col. 3:5*). For example, banquets of the wealthy regularly featured the behaviors Paul decries in Ephesians 5:3–14: drunkenness, ribald speech, risqué entertainment, and immoral acts. In addition, urban centers provided anonymity and permissiveness that fostered immoral sexual practices. On the other hand, many in that society lived virtuous lives and served as advocates for strict morality. When the New Testament provides vice-or-virtue lists and household codes (*e.g., Eph. 5:21–6:9, Col. 3:18–4:1*), its authors mirror themes in the wider Greco-Roman world. This world, at once debauched and virtuous, helps explain Paul’s exhortations to avoid the immoral behavior practiced by the Gentiles while wishing for believers to be circumspect in their behavior and so to earn good standing among outsiders.

**In what ways are Paul’s words about sexual behavior applicable to your culture, wherever you live?**

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## Walking as Children of Light

Paul writes, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, NKJV*).

Paul has identified those who practice various sins without shame or repentance, the “sexually immoral, or impure, or who is covetous” (*Eph. 5:5, ESV*). He has offered a blunt assessment: Those who are in Christ and destined to be participants in His future kingdom should not act like those who are not (*Eph. 5:5*). He now worries over the effect of “empty words”; that is, believers might be deceived by explicit language into thinking that sexual sin is not taboo, or might even be drawn into such sins themselves (*Eph. 5:6*). To be so deceived, warns Paul, risks God’s end-time judgment, “the wrath of God” that “comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, ESV*).

The phrase “the wrath of God” is a challenging one. That it is the wrath or anger of God suggests a contrast to the usual, moody human variety (*compare Eph. 4:31*). It is the just response of a long-suffering and righteous God against stubborn commitment to evil, not a crazed, volcanic reaction to some minor infraction. Moreover, mentions of divine wrath most often occur in the context of inspired, biblical warnings about the coming judgments of God (*e.g., Rev. 6:12–17, Rev. 16:1–16, Rev. 19:11–16*). God warns of His own coming judgments—an act of grace, since human beings are “by nature children of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*), subject to those judgments.

**Why** does Paul exhort believers not to become “partners” or “partakers” with sinners? (*Eph. 5:7–10*).

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Paul exhorts, “Walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*) and continues with a further command: “and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*). The pagan seeks pleasure through “sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness” (*Eph. 5:3, ESV*). The believer’s goal is dramatically different, not to please oneself but to please God (*compare Rom. 12:1, 2 Cor. 5:9, Heb. 13:21*, which use the same Greek word, *euarestos*, “pleasing” or “acceptable”). The believer seeks to reflect the self-sacrifice of Christ (“walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” *Eph. 5:2, ESV*).

**What are some of the “empty words” that in our day and age we need to be wary of?**

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## “Awake, O Sleeper!”

**Read** Ephesians 5:11–14. What powerful warning is Paul giving here, and how does this apply to our present situation?

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To understand Ephesians 5:11–14, it is helpful to observe that Paul repeatedly offers two exhortations, alternating between them: (1) live a God-honoring lifestyle as “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:1, 2, 4, 9–10, 11, 13, 14*); and (2) don’t live a sexually immoral, God-opposing lifestyle, exhibiting the “unfruitful works of darkness” (*Eph. 5:11; see also Eph. 5:3–8, 12*).

We may mine the parallel exhortations in Ephesians 5:8–10 in order to understand Ephesians 5:11. Believers are to live before unbelievers as “light in the Lord” and “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*). The whole point of doing so is to be seen, to make clear that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*). Paul, then, is advocating a strategy of showing forth God’s goodness. Believers are to expose the unfruitful works of darkness by exhibiting the righteous alternative for all to see.

Meanwhile, we may take the challenging, poetic language of verses 13 and 14 as Paul’s daring assertion that believers, by exhibiting “the fruit of the Spirit” (*Eph. 5:9*), may win worldlings to faith in Christ. The Spirit is like light and reveals hidden things: “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light” (*Eph. 5:13, 14, ESV*). When decadent living is exposed by the light, worldlings may see their behavior for what it is (“it becomes visible”), futureless and wrath-bound (*Eph. 5:5, 6*), and experience a darkness-to-light transformation (“for anything that becomes visible is light,” *ESV*), the very change that Paul’s Ephesian readers have experienced as believers themselves (*Eph. 5:8*).

What are we to make of the poem or hymn in Ephesians 5:14, which uses language associated with the resurrection of the dead at the end of time (*compare Eph. 2:1, 5*) to issue a clarion call to awaken from spiritual slumber and experience the transforming presence of Christ? Since Isaiah 60:1–3, which Paul seems to reflect, is directed to God’s people Israel, we may view the hymn/poem of Ephesians 5:14 as a powerful appeal to Christian believers to awaken to their role as missionaries, refractors of the light of Christ in a darkened world (*compare Phil. 2:14–16, Matt. 5:16*).

**How do you live the kind of lifestyle that can expose works of darkness for what they are?**

## Snapping Up the Bargains

Paul concludes Ephesians 5:1–20 with two clusters of exhortations, Ephesians 5:15–17 and Ephesians 5:18–20, completing a section with sustained interest in sexual purity. The first cluster begins with the exhortation, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*), restated as “do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*). In between is a call to make “the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*).

**Consider** Paul’s exhortations to live in a way that reflects prayerful, discerning wisdom (*Eph. 5:15–17*). What is the difference between walking not as fools but “wise”? Also, what does “redeeming the time” mean?

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In Ephesians, Paul has repeatedly used the common Old Testament metaphor of “walking” for how one lives (*Eph. 2:2, 10; Eph. 4:1, 17; Eph. 5:2, 8*). Here he uses the metaphor to encourage intentional discipleship. Just as you should “watch your step” when walking on a rough or darkened path, believers should “look carefully then how you walk” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*). Because Ephesians 5:15 finds a parallel in Ephesians 5:17, we may look there for a definition of what it means to live as wise people. We do not look within for wisdom. To be wise is to reach beyond ourselves, to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*).

Paul also encourages intentional discipleship with a vivid image. In the phrase “making the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*; compare “redeeming the time,” *NKJV*), Paul uses the verb *exagorazō* (compare *Col. 4:5*). Drawn from the marketplace, it is an intensive form of the verb “to buy” and means “to snap up the bargains” on offer as we await Christ’s return. “Time” here is the Greek word *kairos*, which describes a moment of opportunity. The “time” until the end is a promising period to be used to the full. It is also a challenging time because “the days are evil” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*; compare *Eph. 6:13, Gal. 1:4*) and because “the course of this world” is dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, ESV*).

As believers look toward the return of Christ, they live in a difficult time, one that Paul portrays as a hazardous but rewarding marketplace. They are to be as attentive in their use of the time that remains as are bargain hunters during a brief sale that offers steep discounts. Though we can’t buy salvation, the imagery is still apt: take promptly what is offered us in Christ.

## Spirit-Filled Worship

**In** Ephesians 5:18–20, Paul imagines Christians gathered to worship. What does he depict them as doing in that worship?

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In his final argument in Ephesians 5:1–20, Paul urges believers to turn away from the mind-numbing use of wine and instead experience together the presence and power of the Spirit. Paul bans drunkenness (probably with a quotation from Proverbs 23:31 in the Greek version of the Old Testament), suggesting he has in mind the injunctions against the use of alcohol as seen in the wisdom literature (*Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35*). The evil things that come in the wake of drunkenness include crude, sexually explicit speech, mindlessness, immorality, and idolatry (*Eph. 5:3–14*). These are to be exchanged for thoughtful, Spirit-inspired worship of God. Paul’s exhortation to be filled with the Spirit is a key one that is modified by a series of verbs in Ephesians 5:19–21 (“speaking”; “singing and making melody”; “giving thanks”; “submitting yourselves”).

Paul here applies the exhortation to “be filled with the Spirit” (*Eph. 5:18*) corporately, imagining believers gathering in Spirit-inspired worship of God that nourishes unity (*Ephesians 4*) and that stands in contrast with egocentric, pagan behavior and worship (*Eph. 5:1–18*). In this sketch of early Christian worship, musical praise dominates. It has been argued that the church was born in song; and this passage, together with Colossians 3:16, provides the best evidence for the claim (*compare Acts 16:25, James 5:13*).

There is a “horizontal” element to worship since, in singing, church members are in a sense “speaking to one another” (*Eph. 5:19, NKJV*). However, the specific object of the musical praise is the Lord, which, as indicated in Ephesians 5:20, identifies “the Lord Jesus Christ” (*compare Col. 3:16*). The thanksgiving of Ephesians 5:20, described in parallel to the musical praise of Ephesians 5:19, is to be offered “unto God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the phrase “spiritual songs,” the adjective “spiritual” (Greek, *pneumatikos*) highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in worship since the term describes songs that are inspired by or filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul’s sketch of early Christian worship, then, portrays all three members of the Godhead as active participants.

**How can you use music to enhance your own worship experience?**

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**Further Thought:** Looking back at Ephesians 5:1–20 as a whole, we watch Paul take a strong stance against sin and evil, especially in the form of sexual immorality and crude speech. He is unwilling to accept the presence of corrupt behavior among the people of God. Instead, he calls the believers in Ephesus to a high standard of conduct and to embrace their identity as the “beloved children” of God and as “saints,” or holy ones (*Eph. 5:1–10, ESV*). He dares to believe that when the Christians in community do so, they shine a light into the darkness, drawing their neighbors away from self-defeating lifestyles and into God’s grace and truth (*Eph. 5:11–14*).

Paul imagines the church, buoyed by a renewed commitment to “walk as children of light” while they await Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:15, 16*) and blessed by the presence of Christ (*Eph. 5:14*), gathering to worship. As they are motivated by their status “as beloved children” of God and by Christ’s death for them (*Eph. 5:1, 2, ESV*) and are filled with the Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*), their shared worship is characterized by energy and joy as together they sing thanksgiving praise to their Lord, Jesus Christ, and to God the Father. With a firm grip on heavenly realities, they celebrate their hope for the future, rooted in the story of what God has done, is doing, and will accomplish through Jesus Christ their Lord (*Eph. 5:18–20*).

Understood in this way, the passage becomes far more than a set of disconnected commands about Christian living. It becomes a prophetic call concerning Christian identity, commitment, community, and worship in the last days, a pathos-filled invitation to “snap up the bargains” on offer in the days until Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:16*).

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Confronted today with a viral culture that preaches its values 24/7/365 through a withering array of media, how can believers adopt Paul’s high standards?
- ❷ What strategies might believers today employ to “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*) and to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*)?
- ❸ Someone might argue that Paul’s ban against speaking of sexual immorality among believers (*Eph. 5:3, 4*) means that we should not deal with issues of sexual misbehavior and abuse. Why is that an inappropriate conclusion?
- ❹ In what ways does our contemporary society reflect similar pagan practices to those that Paul dealt with in his time?



# Husbands *and* Wives: Together at the Cross



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 5:21–33; Phil. 2:3, 4; Ezek. 16:1–14; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; Gen. 2:15–25.*

**Memory Text:** “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her; that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (*Ephesians 5:25–27, NKJV*).

In Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul builds on the idea of the submission of believers to each other (*Eph. 5:21*); he then offers counsel to Christian wives (*Eph. 5:22–24*) and husbands (*Eph. 5:25–32*); and he concludes with a distillation of the instruction to both (*Eph. 5:33*).

In this counsel, Bible students today may hear the risen Christ addressing our relationships. We are positioned to do so when we understand Ephesians 5:21–6:9 as Paul's way of actualizing the great theme of the letter, unity, but now for the Christian household. While he offers a strong critique of the flawed social structures of the old humanity (*see Eph. 4:22*), he also celebrates the creation of a new humanity (*see Eph. 2:15*) embedded within the wider humanity with its flawed social structures. From within these structures, believers demonstrate that a new power, the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 2:22; Eph. 3:16; Eph. 5:18–21; Eph. 6:17, 18*) and a new ethic patterned on Christ (*Eph. 4:13, 15, 20–24, 32; Eph. 5:2, 10, 17, 21–33*) have been unleashed, which point toward the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for His people and the world.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 2.

## Counsel to Christian Wives

Paul begins with a hinge passage (*Ephesians 5:21*) connecting *Ephesians 5:1–20* and *Ephesians 5:22–33*, in which he advocates for church members to submit to each other (*compare Mark 10:42–45; Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3, 4*). Believers are to do so “out of reverence for Christ” (*Eph. 5:21, ESV*), the first of several times Paul will identify the relationship with Christ as the most important and defining one for believers.

**What** does Paul mean by exhorting church members to submit to each other? How are we to understand this idea? *Eph. 5:21*.

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Paul also invites Christian wives to submit to “your own husbands, as to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:22, ESV*), clarifying that he is discussing the submission of wives to their respective husbands (*see also 1 Pet. 3:1, 5*). When Paul says wives are to do so “as to the Lord,” does he mean a wife is to submit to her husband as though he were Christ; or, instead, does He mean that Christ is the truest and highest focus of her submission?

In view of *Ephesians 6:7*, where slaves are asked to serve “as to the Lord, and not to men” (*NKJV*), and *Colossians 3:18*, where wives are asked to submit to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord” (*NKJV*), the latter view is to be preferred. Wives are themselves believers who must ultimately honor Christ over their husbands.

In both *Colossians* and *Ephesians*, Christ—and only Christ—is identified as the Head of the church, which is His body (*Eph. 1:22, Eph. 5:23, Col. 1:18*): “Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (*Eph. 5:23, NKJV*). By analogy, the husband is “the head of the wife” (*Eph. 5:23*), with the church’s faithfulness to Christ serving as a model for the wife’s loyalty to her husband. The passage presumes a loving, caring marriage, and not a dysfunctional one. This verse should not be interpreted to allow any form of domestic abuse.

**In light of what we have just read, why is this following counsel so important to remember? If the husband “is a coarse, rough, boisterous, egotistical, harsh, and overbearing man, let him never utter the word that the husband is the head of the wife, and that she must submit to him in everything; for he is not the Lord, he is not the husband in the true significance of the term.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 117.**

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## The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 1

**Compare** Ephesians 5:25–27, 29 with the founding story of Ezekiel 16:1–14. What elements of that story does Paul reflect in his own sketch?

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As Paul, in Ephesians 5:25–27, 29, shapes his wedding-marriage metaphor for the church and its relationship with Christ, he draws creatively on the customs and roles of an ancient wedding. In relationship to the church as bride, Christ is the divine Bridegroom who:

(1) *Loves the church as bride* (Eph. 5:25). We must never forget that this is heart work for Jesus. He loves us!

(2) *Gives Himself as the bride price*. In the context of ancient wedding arrangements, the bridegroom would “purchase” the bride with the “bride price,” which was usually a large sum of money and valuables, so large that ancient village economies depended upon the custom. Christ pays the ultimate price for the church as His bride since He “gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25, *NKJV*). In the incarnation and at the cross, He gives Himself as the bride price.

(3) *Bathes His bride*. The preparation of the bride was an important part of the ancient wedding festivities. As is also true today, it was the bridesmaids and female relatives of the bride who prepared her for the ceremony. Paul, though, imagines the divine Bridegroom preparing His bride for the wedding! It is He who sanctifies and cleanses her “by the washing of water” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), a probable reference to baptism.

(4) *Speaks the word of promise*. This cleansing is performed “with the word” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), pointing to the word of promise that the divine Bridegroom speaks to His bride, perhaps in the context of the betrothal ceremony (compare Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 2:1–10, noting God’s promises to believers at the time of their conversion). Betrothal was the ancient version of modern engagement, but was a much more serious set of negotiations, which included a written agreement about the bride price (from the husband) and the dowry (assets the bride would bring to the marriage from her family).

(5) *Prepares and adorns the bride*. When the bride is finally presented to her Groom, she is fabulously beautiful, appearing in flawless splendor (Eph. 5:27). Christ not only bathes the bride; He prepares and adorns her, as well.

**How do these verses help us understand the way Christ feels about us? Why should we find this so comforting?**

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## The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 2

**How** does Paul use elements of the ancient wedding in appealing to Christians in Corinth? When does the presentation occur? (2 Cor. 11:1–4).

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Using one final element of the ancient wedding, in Ephesians 5:25–27 Paul portrays Christ as the One who: (6) *presents the bride (to Himself!)*. In ancient times the bride would be given away by the best man, best men, or her father. Never by her groom! Here, though, Paul imagines Jesus presenting the church as bride to Himself.

Paul uses marriage customs and roles to highlight Christ's relationship to the church in an unfolding, chronological pattern: (1) *Betrothal*. Christ offered Himself up for the church (as "bride price") and so became betrothed to her (Eph. 5:25). (2) *Preparation for the wedding ceremony*. The attentions of the Bridegroom continue in His present efforts to sanctify and cleanse the bride (Eph. 5:26). (3) *The wedding ceremony itself*. Christ's present attentions are in view of the "presentation" of the bride at the wedding (Eph. 5:27). This last element looks to the grand wedding celebration at His return, when Christ, the Bridegroom, will come to claim the church as bride and present her to Himself (Eph. 5:27; compare 2 Cor. 11:1, 2; Col. 1:21–23, 28).

Ancient weddings often began with a nighttime parade (see Matt. 25:1–13). The groom and his entourage would gather at the groom's home—the couple's new home—and with grand ceremony begin a procession. Lit by torches and accompanied by joyful, lilting music and great rejoicing, the crowd jostles toward the home of the father of the bride. Gathering up the bride there or meeting the bride's own procession on the way, the parade would convey the couple to their new home, where the guests would settle into a weeklong feast, culminating in the wedding ceremony, when the bride would be presented to the groom.

When Paul portrays Christ presenting the church to Himself, he alludes to this grand parade and to the moment of presentation. In doing so, he provides a moving portrait of Christ's return as a future wedding ceremony, when the long betrothal between Christ and His church is complete and the wedding celebrated.

**What message should we take for ourselves from all this positive, happy, and hopeful imagery?**

## Love Your Wife as You Do Yourself

**What** new argument does Paul use to encourage husbands to practice tender love toward their wives? *Eph. 5:28–30*.

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Paul's rules for the Christian household (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*) disclose a challenging social context. In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul addresses husbands who, following the all-too-frequent pattern of the time, may choose to “hate their own flesh” (*see Eph. 5:28, 29*), abusing and beating their wives. In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the legal power of the “father of the family” (Latin, *pater familias*) was very broad. He could punish harshly or even kill his wife, children, and slaves and be within his legal rights (though exercising such power in extreme ways was increasingly constrained by public opinion).

In Ephesians 5:25–27, Paul has detailed the ultimate example of love, Christ's love for the church, offering a drastically different model for husbands than the usual one. Now, before laying out a new argument, he points again to that great Example, asking Christian husbands to respond “in the same way” (*Eph. 5:28, ESV*) as Jesus, who “gave himself up” for His bride, the church, and attends to her every need (*Eph. 5:25–27, ESV*). Paul challenges Christian husbands to turn from the expected practices of their time and seek to match Christ's tender love.

In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul adds a new rationale to support the love of Christian husbands for their wives: self-love. Paul offers a truism: “No one ever hated his own flesh” (at least no one thinking clearly). Husbands don't harm themselves or beat up on their own bodies. Instead, they “nourish and cherish” them (*Eph. 5:29, NKJV*). In a bid to eliminate harshness and violence against Christian wives, Paul invites the Christian husband to identify with his wife. You are so much one with your wife, Paul argues, that to harm her is nothing short of inflicting self-harm, and most people in their right minds don't do that.

Returning to the example of Jesus, Paul argues that Christ is Himself practicing tender self-care in cherishing believers who are “his body” (*Eph. 5:29, 30, ESV*). Model your behavior toward your wife, says Paul, on the way you treat yourself and, ultimately, on the way Christ treats you.

**Paul cites the example of Jesus to both wives and husbands. What can you learn from Jesus about loving those in your own family circle?**

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## The “One Flesh” Model of Marriage

**Study** the Creation narrative of Genesis 2:15–25. What happens in the story before the statement concerning a husband and wife being “one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24*)?

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A key to applying Paul’s counsel to wives and husbands is to see his citation of Genesis 2:24 (*in Ephesians 5:31*) as the culmination of it. As he meditates on the Creation story of Genesis, Paul considers the needs of Christian congregations and the health of family relationships within them. He hears in Genesis 2:24 a message that echoes down through time. By divine design, marriage is intended to be a “one flesh” relationship, with sexual unity mirrored in emotional and spiritual unity, and emotional and spiritual unity bringing meaning to the sexual relationship.

Note that in choosing Genesis 2:24, Paul selects a statement about marriage made before the Fall and applies it to the relationships between Christian husbands and wives. In our distinctly post-Fall world, rampant exploitation of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman reveals how deeply entrenched in modern cultures is the idea that the sexual union represents subjugation of the woman. Paul argues that the sexual relationship, as reflected in Genesis, is not one of subjugation but of union. It does not symbolize or actualize the dominance of the male but the union of husband and wife, so much so that they are “one flesh.” We may look to both Ephesians 5:21–33 and Genesis 2:24, then, for an important, countercultural, and corrective theology of marriage and sexuality.

In this same context, Paul in the next verse talks about a “profound mystery” (*see Eph. 5:32, ESV*). This includes both sides of the double metaphor Paul has been discussing: Christian marriage understood in the light of Christ’s relationship with His church (*Eph. 5:32*) and Christ’s relationship with His church understood in the light of Christian marriage (*Eph. 5:32*).

Christian marriage is elevated by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and the church. In addition, by thinking of the church’s relationship to Christ through the lens of a caring, Christian marriage, believers gain new clarity about their shared relationship to Christ.

**In what ways does Ephesians 5:33 serve as a concise summary of Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–32? If married, how can you seek to more fully implement these principles in your marriage?**

**Further Thought:** Ellen G. White, “Responsibilities of Married Life,” *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 45–50, and “Mutual Obligations,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 114–120.

Ellen G. White consistently urges marriage partners to turn away from efforts to control the other: “Do not try to compel each other to yield to your wishes. You cannot do this and retain each other’s love. Be kind, patient, and forbearing, considerate, and courteous.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 118.

She comments directly on the interpretation and application of Colossians 3:18 (*and Eph. 5:22–24*): “The question is often asked, ‘Shall a wife have no will of her own?’ The Bible plainly states that the husband is the head of the family. ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands.’ If this injunction ended here, we might say that the position of the wife is not an enviable one. . . . Many husbands stop at the words, ‘Wives, submit yourselves,’ but we will read the conclusion of the same injunction, which is, ‘As it is fit in the Lord’ [*Col. 3:18*]. God requires that the wife shall keep the fear and glory of God ever before her. Entire submission is to be made only to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has purchased her as His own child by the infinite price of His life. . . . There is One who stands higher than the husband to the wife; it is her Redeemer, and her submission to her husband is to be rendered as God has directed—‘as it is fit in the Lord.’ ”—*The Adventist Home*, pp. 115, 116.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① Imagine someone arguing that Ephesians 5:21–33 is an outmoded passage that no longer addresses Christian relationships since it enforces a model of marriage focused on the authority and domination of the husband. How would you respond? What elements from the passage itself would inform your response?
- ② What might Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–33 have to offer to those who find themselves in challenging and difficult marriage relationships?
- ③ Some Christians argue that the Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 is a mere metaphor and that it doesn’t come close to depicting what really happened, which was billions of years of evolution. What does Paul’s use of the story teach us about how literally he took it?
- ④ Dwell more on the theme of “one flesh.” How does this help us better understand the sanctity of marriage and why married couples must do everything possible to protect that sanctity?

# Practicing Supreme Loyalty to Christ



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 6:1–9; Mark 10:13–16; Col. 3:21; 1 Pet. 2:18–25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25.*

**Memory Text:** “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (*Ephesians 6:9, NIV*).

In 2018, an artifact at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, attracted much attention. It was an abridged Bible designed to teach essentials of faith while deleting any passage inciting rebellion by slaves. Published in 1808, the text does not just remove a passage here or there. Ninety percent of the Old Testament is missing, and 50 percent of the New. Of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible, only 232 remain.

Passages seeming to reinforce the evils of slavery, especially in the absence of so much of the Bible's narrative of “good news,” are left fully intact, including such oft-misused texts as “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (*Eph. 6:5*).

Today, in our time and culture, our important challenge is to read Ephesians 6:1–9 in the context of the full story of salvation, as is revealed in the complete Bible. What can we learn as we watch Paul apply the values of the gospel to the flawed social structures of his day?

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 9.



## Advice to Children

**What** advice does Paul give to children, and how does he support that counsel from the Old Testament? *Eph. 6:1–3*. (See also *Matt. 18:1–5, 10*; *Mark 10:13–16*.)

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To appreciate fully Paul's counsel to children, we must imagine it being read out in the house churches of the thriving metropolis of Ephesus. The word "children" (Greek, *ta tekna*) could refer to a wide range of ages, since children remained under the father's authority until the father was 60 (in the Greek tradition) or until his death (in the Roman one). These children, though, are young enough to be under parental training (*Eph. 6:4*) but old enough themselves to be disciples in their own right.

We hear Paul appealing to children, who were worshiping in Christian congregations, to obey and honor their parents "in the Lord," that is, in Christ (*compare Eph. 5:22; Eph. 6:4, 5, 7–9*). We are invited here to respect children as themselves being disciples of Christ and to include them as active participants in worship. This makes the passage a foundational one for parenting and for ministry to children.

Paul's command to obey is not absolute. When the commands of parents "contradict the requirements of Christ, then, painful though it may be, they [children] must obey God and trust the consequences with Him."—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 293.

Paul completes his exhortation to children by quoting the fifth commandment, bearing witness to the high value he places on the Ten Commandments as a source of guidance for Christian believers (an obvious feature of *Eph. 4:1–6:9*; especially *Eph. 4:25, 28; Eph. 5:3–14*). He begins the quotation (" 'Honor your father and mother,' " *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), breaks into it with an editorial comment ("which is the first commandment with promise," *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), and then completes the citation (" 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth,' " *Eph. 6:3, NKJV*). The fifth commandment bears witness that honoring parents is part of God's design for human beings to thrive. Respect for parents, imperfect though they may be, will help foster health and well-being.

**How do these verses reinforce how important family relationships are?**

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## Advice to Parents

**Compare** Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. What motivation does Colossians 3:21 provide for avoiding irritating one's children?

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Sirach, a Jewish document available in Paul's day, advises fathers about the treatment of their sons: "He who loves his son will whip him often. . . . Pamper a child, and he will terrorize you; play with him, and he will grieve you. . . . Discipline your son and make his yoke heavy, so that you may not be offended by his shamelessness" (*Sirach 30:1, 9, 13, NRSV*).

Paul's counsel bears a very different tone. He first addresses a negative command to fathers: "Do not provoke your children to anger," followed by a positive one, "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*). In Paul's day, fathers had complete legal power over their children, who were regarded as his property. Fathers had the right to inflict violent punishment, even death, on their children. Indeed, in some respects a father's power over his children exceeded a master's authority over his slaves. Paul is not endorsing such power but is boldly clarifying and reshaping family relationships. In the context of a supreme loyalty to Christ, Paul invites Christian fathers to rethink their use of power since children who are provoked to anger will not be well positioned to accept "the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*).

"Fathers and mothers, in the home you are to represent God's disposition. You are to require obedience, not with a storm of words, but in a kind, loving manner. . . .

"Be pleasant in the home. Restrain every word that would arouse unholy temper. 'Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath,' is a divine injunction. . . .

"No license is given in God's Word for parental severity or oppression or for filial disobedience. The law of God, in the home life and in the government of nations, flows from a heart of infinite love."—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 259.

**Though the context of the lesson here deals with parents and children, what principles can be taken from these texts that should impact how we should deal with all other people?**

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## Slavery in Paul's Day

**Read** through the counsel to slaves and slave masters in the following passages: Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; 1 Cor. 7:20–24; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 1 Pet. 2:18–25. How would you summarize this advice?

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It is startling to hear Paul address Christian slave masters and to imagine Christian slaves and their Christian slave master seated together in the house churches of Ephesus. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world could differ from the later version in the New World in significant ways. It was not focused on a single ethnic group. Urban, household slaves were sometimes offered opportunities for education and could work as architects, physicians, and philosophers. Freedom sometimes occurred for these household slaves after a limited period of service, though most slaves never gained their freedom. In an attempt to acknowledge such differences, a number of recent Bible versions translate the Greek term *doulos* (“slave”) in Ephesians 6:5–8 as “bondservant.”

Regardless, slavery at any time, in any culture, in any circumstances, is an inexcusable evil, and God will judge, and condemn, slaveholders according to His infinite justice—and for that we can be thankful.

The cry of ex-slave Publilius Syrus is haunting: “It is beautiful to die instead of being degraded as a slave.” Given the full range of these realities, the translation of *doulos* as “slave” is to be preferred (*NIV*, *NRSV*), especially since these slaves are living under the threat of their masters (Eph. 6:9).

Slavery was an ever-present evil in Paul's world. He addresses it, not as a social reformer but as a pastor who advises believers how to deal with current realities and to cast a new vision centered on the transformation of the individual believer, which later could have wider implications for society at large: “His vision was not for *manumission of slaves in the Roman Empire*. Rather his view was about something other than *legal manumission, that is, a new creation sibling-based fellowship on the basis of adoption as children of God*. . . . For Paul the social revolution was to occur in the church, in the body of Christ, at the local level, and in the Christian house church and household.” —Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), pp. 10, 11.

**One of the great stains on Christian history is how some used these biblical passages about slavery to justify this evil. What frightening message should we take away about how carefully we need to handle the Word of God?**

## Slaves of Christ

**What** does Paul require of Christian slaves in his detailed instructions to them? *Eph. 6:5–8*.

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Paul asks Christian slaves to obey their masters, offering heartfelt, excellent service. What is notable is his repeated reference to a grand substitution that he asks them to make. They are not to place their slave master in the place of Christ, offering to him the allegiance that belongs only to Christ. Rather, in the commitments and allegiance that motivate their heartfelt, excellent service, they are to substitute Christ, the Lord, for the slave master. In encouraging this essential substitution, Paul is offering a transformed, Christian understanding of the master-slave relationship.

Notice the several ways Paul presses this substitution upon them:

- \* Their slave masters are diminished by Paul as their “*earthly masters*,” pointing toward the real and heavenly Master (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- \* They are to serve “with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, *as you would Christ*” (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- \* Paul notes this substitution most clearly in arguing that Christian slaves are to offer genuine service as slaves, not of their masters, but as “slaves of Christ” (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- \* In performing their service, they are to do “the will of God from the heart,” offering heartfelt service directed to God (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- \* Paul invites positively motivated service, offered “as to the Lord and not to man” (*Eph. 6:7, ESV*).

For their heartfelt service, Christian slaves may expect full reward from Christ when He returns. They have done their work for Him and may expect reward from Him, an especially attractive idea for those trapped in this horrific institution. A slave might feel unappreciated or worse by an earthly master (*compare 1 Pet. 2:19, 20*). The believing slave, though, has a Master who is attentive, noticing “whatever good thing each one does” (*Eph. 6:8, NASB*), and offering sure reward.

**However much we might wish that Scripture had openly condemned this horrible practice, it doesn’t. Nevertheless, what principles can we draw from Paul’s words in this context about how we relate to people we work with in our own context?**

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## Masters Who Are Slaves

In Paul's final words to slaves, "whether he is a slave or free" (*Eph.* 6:8, *NKJV*), the word "free" refers to slave masters, allowing Paul to transition to his counsel to them while imagining slaves and slave masters standing on an equal footing before Christ in the judgment (*compare 2 Cor.* 5:10; *Col.* 3:24, 25).

**Assuming** that you are a Christian slave master who is listening to Ephesians being read out in your house church, how might you react to this counsel, offered in the presence of your slaves? *Eph.* 6:9.

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Paul addresses masters, slave masters, in a pointed exhortation, which turns on the sharp contrast between "the lords" (Greek, *hoi kurioi*, translated as "masters"), who had a habit of "threatening" their slaves, and "the Lord" (*ho kurios*), Christ, with whom there is "no partiality" (*ESV*).

Paul asks masters to "do the same to them" (*ESV*), the slaves, which would have been shocking to a first-century slave owner. Masters should respond to their slaves with deeds of goodwill governed by their allegiance to Christ, corresponding to what Paul has just asked of slaves (*Eph.* 6:5–8). He tells them to stop threatening their slaves, a common practice of a time in which masters administered a wide variety of punishments, including beating (*1 Pet.* 2:20), sexual abuse, being sold (and parted from loved ones), extreme labor, starvation, shackles, branding, and even death. For this, they will be judged—by God.

Paul supports his commands with two motivations that call slave masters to look beyond the social structures of the Greco-Roman world: (1) they and their presumed slaves are co-slaves of a single Master ("knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven," *ESV*; *compare Col.* 4:1); and (2) the heavenly Master judges all without partiality. Since their own Master treats those regarded as slaves on an equal footing with others, so should they (*compare Philem.* 15, 16).

Much of Paul's language in Ephesians would be especially heartening for Christian slaves: adoption as sons (*Eph.* 1:5); redemption (*Eph.* 1:7); inheritance (*Eph.* 1:11, 14; *Eph.* 3:6); being enthroned with Jesus (*Eph.* 2:6); becoming "fellow citizens," "members of the household of God" (*Eph.* 2:19, *ESV*; *compare Eph.* 3:14, 15), and integral parts of the body of Christ (*see Eph.* 3:6, *Eph.* 4:1–16). Ephesians 6:5–9 activates all the teaching in the letter as operative in the relationships between slaves and slave masters, including the counsel about speech (*Eph.* 4:25–32) and sexual ethics (*Eph.* 5:1–14).

**Further Thought:** Paul's respect for children as fellow believers (*Eph. 6:1–3*) heightens our concern for the ways in which children are treated in our world today. His word to fathers (*Eph. 6:4*) invites us to consider parental responsibilities. Applying Paul's counsel to slaves (*Eph. 6:5–8*), and, especially, his counsel to slave masters (*Eph. 6:9*), is more challenging, since the social setting is distant for many of us and because we know that slavery, *in any form*, is one of the greatest of moral evils. Still, since these words are inspired ones that are part of Scripture, we should ponder how to apply them today. With the believers in Ephesus in the first century, we have the privilege and responsibility of applying the values of the gospel to our relationships. The discussion questions below are designed to foster that important work.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean for Adventists that love for children is identified as evidence of “a people prepared for the Lord”? *Luke 1:17* (quoting *Mal. 4:6*).
- ❷ Paul's obvious respect for children suggests a searching question: What is our responsibility to extend the care of Christ to children who have experienced violence, sexual abuse, and shame in their early lives? In view of research on the profound impact of adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs; see <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/>), what is our responsibility toward them?
- ❸ As an extension of Paul's respect for children and Jesus' care for them, what responsibilities does the church have to nurture and protect the children in its care? What systems and procedures need to be in place to do so?
- ❹ Paul's counsel to slaves and slave masters, *Ephesians 6:5–9*, is often applied to the relationships between employees and employers. In what ways might this be appropriate? What dangers present themselves in doing so?
- ❺ Slavery remains a painful reality in our world, with more than 40 million people enslaved (according to “The Global Slavery Index,” <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>). As free people whose spiritual forebears were firmly committed to the abolition of slavery, what are our responsibilities to these enslaved sons and daughters of God as we sing of Christ, “Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease” (lyrics to “O Holy Night,” public domain)?

# The Call *to* Stand



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 6:10–20; Deut. 20:2–4; Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Thess. 5:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:23, 24.*

**Memory Text:** “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (*Ephesians 6:10, 11, ESV*).

**B**leary-eyed, the servant stumbles out of his lodgings and sees an alarming sight—a large, well-equipped and hostile army with “troops, horses, and chariots everywhere.” Speaking to the prophet Elisha, he stammers out the news, along with his harried question, “‘Oh, sir, what will we do now?’”

Elisha responds, “‘Don’t be afraid! . . . For there are more on our side than on theirs!’” a response that fails to register in the face of his servant. Elisha, pulling him close, prays for him: “‘O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!’” The prophet’s prayer is answered immediately. The servant steps to the ramparts again, but this time the veil between the seen and the unseen lifts. He now sees not one army, but two. “The Lord opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire” (*2 Kings 6:15–17, NLT*).

In composing *Ephesians 6:10–20*, Paul prays for an enhanced vision for believers so that they will be able to see the full reality of the great controversy and to draw hope from what it reveals to them.

\* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 16.*

## Battle Speech

**Study** Paul's ringing conclusion to his letter, Ephesians 6:10–20. What does Paul's battle cry mean to us today, as combatants in the great controversy?

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Paul concludes Ephesians with a call to battle, urging believers to take their stand in the church's war against evil (*Eph. 6:10–20*). He begins with an overarching exhortation to “be strong in the Lord” (*Eph. 6:10*), which he repeats as a call to “put on the whole armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11*). He supports this call by specifying a purpose (to be able to stand against the devil's schemes, *Eph. 6:11*), and by offering a rationale: the battle is against powerful, spiritual forces of evil (*Eph. 6:12*). In a detailed way, Paul then reissues the call to arms. Believers are to “take up the whole armor of God” in order to stand firm in battle (*Eph. 6:13, ESV*), donning belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword (*Eph. 6:14–17*). Paul invites believers, now fully armed and ready to enter the fray, to do what soldiers on the ancient battlefield might do—and that is, pray (*Eph. 6:18–20*).

By echoing battle exhortations or eve-of-battle speeches in the Old Testament, Paul speaks of the church's mission in terms of military conflict and weapons. Paul signals this in his first, overarching command: “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (*Eph. 6:10, NKJV*).

Battle exhortations in the Old Testament (*see, for instance, Deut. 20:2–4; Judges 7:15–18; 2 Chron. 20:13–20; 2 Chron. 32:6–8; Neh. 4:14, 19, 20*) underline the idea that Israel's success in battle does not depend on the superiority of its own weapons or an army that outnumbered its foes. Rather, victory results from depending on the presence and power of God. The key to the Israelites' success was not confidence in themselves but firm trust in God's power and His provision for their success. Paul makes bold use of these themes to exhort believers to be: (1) active in pursuing the church's mission; (2) attentive to the unseen dimensions that impact their lives and witness; (3) cognizant of the divine provision for their success; and (4) always alert to the importance of unity and collaboration among believers.

**What should Paul's warning that we fight not against flesh and blood but against supernatural enemies teach us about where our only hope of victory is?**



## Finding Strength in Christ

Paul ends his letter with a powerful call to battle that draws together themes and ideas important to the letter as a whole. He begins by announcing the overarching theme of the conclusion, offered in the tone of a commander's battle cry: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (*Eph. 6:10, ESV*). The rest of the passage (*Ephesians 6:11–20*) illustrates and unpacks this large theme.

**Read** again Ephesians 6:10–20. How do you see the reality of the great controversy, which involves literal supernatural powers, as central to Paul's point? Why is keeping this crucial truth before us so important in our own daily walk with God?

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Paul identifies Christ as the Source of believers' strength with his phrase "in the Lord and in the power of His might" (*Eph. 6:10, NKJV*) since "Lord" refers to Christ, as is consistently the case in Ephesians (*Eph. 2:21; Eph. 4:1, 17; Eph. 5:8; Eph. 6:1, 21*). "The Church's strength lies in the almightiness of her risen Lord, the Captain of her warfare."—G. G. Findlay, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1931), p. 398.

Paul uses repetition in Ephesians 6:10, employing the synonyms *power* and *might* to underline his point: the power to be exhibited by the church is not inherent in believers but is derived. It comes from the Lord, from Christ. Paul summarizes here an important theme of the letter, God's power shared with believers (*Eph. 1:19–22; Eph. 2:4–6; Eph. 3:16, 17*). Strength for every current and future conflict is to be found in believers' solidarity with the resurrected and exalted Christ.

While the initial command announces Christ as active in providing strength to believers (*Eph. 6:10*), all three members of the Godhead are engaged in strengthening them for spiritual combat against evil. God (the Father) makes His own weapons available as the "armor of God" (*Eph. 6:11, 13; compare Isa. 59:17*). Earlier, Paul has identified the Spirit as active in strengthening believers. Paul prayed that God may grant you "to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (*Eph. 3:16, ESV*). Here, it is the Spirit who issues the sword, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (*Eph. 6:17*). Also, believers are to pray "at all times in the Spirit" (*Eph. 6:18, ESV*). Paul wishes his hearers to understand that the triune God is fully engaged in equipping them to battle against these evil powers.

## The Great Controversy in Paul's Letters

**Read** Romans 13:11–14, 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8, and 2 Corinthians 10:3–6. How do these verses compare with Ephesians 6:10–20? Why do you think Paul uses this kind of imagery?

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In his letters, Paul frequently employs military language and imagery, inviting believers to mimic exemplary, soldierly behavior. While Ephesians 6:10–20 represents his longest and most concentrated use, military language exhibits one of his major ways of understanding the gospel story. Having conquered the “rulers and authorities” at the cross (*Col. 2:15, ESV*), the exalted Christ now works out the results of that victory from His position as exalted Lord over the powers (*Phil. 2:9–11*). Recruiting His followers as combatants in the cosmic war, Christ leads the armies of light toward a grand day of victory (*1 Cor. 15:54–58, 2 Thess. 2:8, Rom. 16:20*). Gathering up Paul’s uses of military symbolism, we see that he understands the conflict between good and evil to be “a long-running cosmic war: battles ebb and flow between two armies which face each other down through the ages until one wins the final confrontation.”—Peter W. Macky, *St. Paul’s Cosmic War Myth: A Military Version of the Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1998), p. 1.

Paul’s frequent theme of cosmic war is also part of the fabric of Ephesians. In his call to arms (*Eph. 6:10–20*), Paul draws together elements of the cosmic conflict, that he has already used: God’s empowering of believers with immense “power” (*Eph. 1:18–20; Eph. 3:16, 20*); Christ’s victory and exaltation over the powers (*Eph. 1:20–23*); believers as a resurrected army of the once-dead but now empowered by their identity with the exalted Christ and able to fight against their former, dark master (*Eph. 2:1–10*); the church’s role in revealing to the powers their coming doom (*Eph. 3:10*); the use of Psalm 68:18 to portray Christ as the conquering, divine Warrior (*Eph. 4:7–11*); and the call for believers to “put on” gospel clothing (*see Eph. 4:20–24*). When called to put on God’s “full armor,” we are well prepared to understand the central role of cosmic conflict, but, also, we are to remain firm in the assurance that we have of participating in Christ’s ultimate victory.

**What are some of the ways that you personally have experienced the reality not only of this cosmic conflict but of the victory we can claim for ourselves in Jesus? Why is understanding His victory for us so foundational to our hope and experience?**

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## Standing on the Ancient Battlefield

**Read** through Ephesians 6:10–20, noting each time Paul uses some form of the verb *stand*. Why is this idea so important to him?

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We must understand Paul's military metaphor in the context of the ancient battlefield. What did it mean to "stand" (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*)? Does the verb suggest a defensive-only posture? Battle speeches included in the writings of Thucydides, one of the great classical authors of battle literature, highlight three successive actions that must occur if a side is to be victorious: (1) soldiers must "close with the enemy," which means they must march to meet their foes; then, (2) they must attack and "stand fast," or "stand our ground," fighting hand-to-hand with their foes; and finally, (3) they must "beat back the enemy" (see Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910], 4.10.1–5).

The key moment of an ancient battle occurred with the second of these three actions, when the two opposing phalanxes came crashing together in "a terrible cacophony of smashed bronze, wood, and flesh," which ancient author Xenophon refers to as that "'awful crash.'"—Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 152, 153. Standing firm, holding one's ground at this strategic moment, was the great challenge of ancient battle. In the close combat that would ensue, each side would seek momentum for "the push."

Paul's call to arms reflects combat in which soldiers were "bunched together, giving and receiving hundreds of blows at close range."—Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, p. 152. This is confirmed by Paul's depiction of the church's battle against its foes as a wrestling match (*Eph. 6:12*; see Thursday's study) and in his use of an intensive form of the verb "to stand" in verse 13: "that you may be able to *withstand* in the evil day" (*NKJV, ESV; emphasis added*).

This is no relaxed stance! To "stand," then, is to be vigorously engaged in battle, employing every weapon in close-order combat, a point obvious from the military imagery in Paul's earlier exhortation to be found "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (*Phil. 1:27, ESV*).

**Read Hebrews 12:4. How does this verse help encapsulate what it means to stand in the Lord? What is the corporate nature of this standing, as well?**

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## Wrestling Against Evil Powers

**What** do you judge to be Paul’s purpose in listing a variety of titles for the evil spiritual powers depicted in Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 3:10, and Ephesians 6:10–20?

Paul describes “our struggle” (*Eph. 6:12, NRSV*), using a Greek word for the competition between wrestlers (*palé*). Since wrestling was regarded as excellent preparation for battle, this is an appropriate description of the weapon-against-weapon and hand-to-hand combat that takes place when armies clash. Paul is emphasizing the reality of believers’ close struggle against the evil powers.

Here are the titles he gives them:

Ephesians 1:21	Ephesians 3:10	Ephesians 6:12
every ruler (or every rule)	the rulers	the rulers
(every) authority	the authorities	the authorities
(every) power		the cosmic powers over this present darkness
(every) dominion		the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places
every name named		

In his broad descriptions (“every name named,” *Eph. 1:21, LEB*; “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” *Eph. 6:12, ESV*), Paul does affirm that all evil and supernatural powers are subjugated to Christ (*Eph. 1:21*). However, in any battle, it is never a good strategy to underestimate the forces on the opposing side. Paul warns that we do not just confront human enemies, but “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NKJV*), led by a wily general, the devil (*Eph. 6:11*). However, while we must be on the alert against our powerful foes, we need not be daunted by them. God is present with us in the battle (*Eph. 6:10*) and has supplied us with the finest of weaponry, His own armor, the “armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11; compare Isa. 59:15–17*). He has placed at our disposal His truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation, and the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 6:13–17*). With God going before us and our being equipped from head to toe in the armor He has supplied, we cannot fail (*Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 15:23, 24; 2 Thess. 2:8*).

**What should the reality of these supernatural evil powers—against whom we, ourselves, are utterly helpless—teach us regarding why we must grasp hold of the Lord Jesus, who is not only greater than these powers but has already defeated them?**

**Further Thought:** “Our work is an aggressive one, and as faithful soldiers of Jesus, we must bear the blood-stained banner into the very strongholds of the enemy. ‘We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.’ If we will consent to lay down our arms, to lower the blood-stained banner, to become the captives and servants of Satan, we may be released from the conflict and the suffering. But this peace will be gained only at the loss of Christ and heaven. We cannot accept peace on such conditions. Let it be war, war, to the end of earth’s history, rather than peace through apostasy and sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 8, 1888.

How does Ephesians 6:10–20 relate to the book of Revelation? The passage exhibits the same basic view of last-day events, or eschatology, as the battle motif in the book of Revelation (see *Revelation 12*, *Rev. 16:12–16*, *Rev. 19:17–21*, *Rev. 20:7–10*). In both, the people of God are under attack by the enemy who is “in heavenly places” and “is active and powerful in the present *aeon*” (or age). In both, the people of God are encouraged by “the picture of the future *aeon*.” Further, “both scenarios explicitly point to the final battle when the enemy will be conquered completely after which the new *aeon* will be established forever,” a new age in which “the final glorious state of the people of God” and “the eternal doom of the enemy” will be evident (see Yordan Kalev Zhekov, *Eschatology of Ephesians* [Osijek, Croatia: Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2005], pp. 217, 233–235).

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ When have you most clearly confronted the powers of darkness? What have you found to be the most helpful strategies at those times?
- ❷ Informed by Ephesians 6:10–20, how would you minister to someone who seems especially oppressed by “the spiritual forces of evil” (*Eph. 6:12, ESV*)?
- ❸ How do we best discern and reject “the schemes of the devil” (*Eph. 6:11, ESV*)? For example, how often do you feel ready to give up your faith because you feel that you are too sinful, too corrupt, to be saved? Who is putting that thought in your head—Christ or the forces of darkness? Especially at times like that, why must you claim many of the wonderful promises we have been given in Jesus?

# Waging Peace



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Eph. 6:10–20, 1 Pet. 4:1, 1 Pet. 5:8, Isa. 59:17, Isa. 52:8–10, 1 Thess. 5:16–18.

**Memory Text:** “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:16, 17, *ESV*).

In John Bunyan's devotional classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written while he was in jail, Christian is escorted into a palace armory and shown “all manner of furniture [weaponry], which their Lord had provided for pilgrims, as sword, shield, helmet, breastplate, all-prayer, and shoes that would not wear out. And there was here enough of this to harness [fit] out as many men for the service of the Lord, as there be stars in the heaven for multitude.” Before Christian departs, he is again escorted into the armory where “they harnessed [fitted] him from head to foot with what was of proof [impenetrable], lest, perhaps, he should meet with assaults in the way.”

Bunyan's writing in 1678 recalls a document written some 1,600 years earlier by the apostle Paul, the Epistle to the Ephesians, also composed in prison. In it the great missionary apostle imagines a great army, the church, visiting God's armory and suiting up in the divine *panoplia*, the Greek term for full, head-to-toe armor. God's armory holds enough of the finest weaponry for every soldier in His army to be “clad with northern steel from top to toe,” as they set forth to wage peace in His name.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 23.

## The Church: A Unified Army

**Read** Ephesians 6:10–20. What is Paul saying about the kind of warfare the church is engaged in? Is Paul primarily depicting just an individual believer's spiritual battle against evil, or the church's corporate war against evil?

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Victory in Greek and Roman warfare was dependent on the cooperation of the soldiers in a military unit and especially in their support for each other in the heat of battle. Individualism in battle was regarded as a characteristic of barbarian warriors, dooming them to defeat.

There are important reasons to support the idea that Paul, in line with this usual military understanding, is primarily addressing the church's shared battle against evil in Ephesians 6:10–20: (1) The passage is the climax of a letter that is all about the church. It would be strange for Paul to conclude his letter with a picture of a lone Christian warrior doing battle against the foes of darkness; (2) At the end of the passage, Paul highlights Christian camaraderie in his call to prayer “for all the saints” (*Eph. 6:18–20, ESV*); (3) Most significant of all, earlier in the letter when Paul discusses the powers of evil, he places them over against the church, not the individual believer: “So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 3:10, ESV*).

Thus, Ephesians 6:10–20 does not portray a solitary, lone warrior confronting evil. Instead, Paul as a general addresses the church as an army. He calls us to take up our full armor and, as a unified army, vigorously and unitedly press the battle. Paul chooses to conclude his thoroughgoing emphasis on the church, which has included sustained descriptions of the church as the body of Christ (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 4:1–16*), the building/temple of God (*Eph. 2:19–22*), and the bride of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*), with a final metaphor, the church as the army of the living God. Since we are approaching “the evil day” (*Eph. 6:13*), the final stages of the long-running battle against evil, it is no time to be fuzzy about our commitment to God or our loyalty to one another as fellow soldiers of Christ.

**In what ways can we, as a corporate body, work together in the great controversy, in order to help each other in our struggles against evil, in whatever form it comes?**

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## Belt and Breastplate

**How** does Paul imagine believers beginning their preparation for the battle against evil? *Eph. 6:14*; see also *1 Pet. 4:1*, *1 Pet. 5:8*, *Rom. 8:37–39*.

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Paul's warning of an intense battle (*Eph. 6:13*) prepares readers for his final call to stand (his fourth, *compare Eph. 6:11, 13*) and is a detailed call to arms (*Eph. 6:14–17*). Paul describes the action of "girding up one's waist" (*compare Isa. 11:5*). Ancient, loose-fitting garments needed to be tied up around the waist before work or battle (*compare Luke 12:35, 37; Luke 17:8*). Paul imagines the believer suiting up in armor as would a Roman legionnaire, beginning with the leather military belt with its decorative belt plates and buckle. From the belt hung a number of leather straps covered with metal discs, together forming an "apron" worn as a badge of rank for visual effect. It served the essential function of tying up the garments and holding other items in place.

Truth is not the believers' own; it is a gift of God (*compare salvation in Eph. 2:8*). It is not, though, to remain abstract, a distant asset without any transforming impact on their lives. They are to "put on" God's truth, to experience and use this divine gift. They do not so much possess God's truth as God's truth possesses and protects them.

Paul next urges believers to put on "the breastplate of righteousness" (*compare 1 Thess. 5:8*). Like the belt of truth, it is of divine origin, being part of the armor of Yahweh in His role as the divine warrior (*Isa. 59:17*). The body armor used by soldiers in Paul's day was made of mail (small, intertwined iron rings), scale armor (small, overlapping scales of bronze or iron), or bands of overlapping iron fastened together. This body armor or breastplate protected the vital organs from the blows and thrusts of the enemy. In an analogous way, believers are to experience the spiritual protection offered by God's protective gift of righteousness. In Ephesians, Paul associates *righteousness* with holiness, goodness, and truth (*Eph. 4:24, Eph. 5:9*), thinking of it as the quality of treating others justly and well, especially fellow church members.

**In what ways have you experienced the idea that goodness, holiness, and truth can be a protection?**

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## Shoes: The Church Wages Peace

A Roman soldier, preparing for battle, would tie on a pair of sturdy, military sandals. A multilayered sole featured rugged hobnails, helping the soldier hold his ground and “stand” (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*). Paul explains this military footwear with language from Isaiah 52:7, which celebrates the moment when a messenger brings the news that Yahweh’s battle on behalf of His people is won (*Isa. 52:8–10*) and peace now reigns: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace” (*Isa. 52:7, ESV*).

**Review** the eight times Paul highlights peace in Ephesians. Why does he use a detailed military metaphor when he is so interested in peace? *Eph. 1:2; Eph. 2:14, 15, 17; Eph. 4:3; Eph. 6:15, 23.*

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Paul celebrates peace as the work of Christ, “our peace,” the One who preaches peace “to you who were far off and peace to those who were near” (*Eph. 2:14–17, ESV*), drawing Jew and Gentile together into “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV*). By keeping alive the gospel story of Christ’s rescue and His creative work of peace, by celebrating His victory past and looking toward the victory shout in the future, believers shod their feet and stand ready for battle. Like the messenger in Isaiah 52:7, believers are messengers proclaiming the victory of Christ and His peace.

Paul, however, does not wish us to understand his call to arms as a call to take up military weapons against our enemies. That’s why he describes believers as proclaiming “the gospel of peace” (*Eph. 6:15*). Nor does he wish believers to be combative in their relationships with others, since he has been emphasizing unity, edifying speech, and tenderheartedness (*see especially Eph. 4:25–5:2*). The church is to “wage peace” by employing the gospel arsenal of Christian virtues (humility, patience, forgiveness, etc.) and practices (prayer, worship). Such acts are strategic, pointing toward God’s grand plan to unify all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*).

**How does the following quote help us understand what Paul’s military imagery should mean in our lives as believers? “God calls upon us to put on the armour. We do not want Saul’s armour, but the whole armour of God. Then we can go forth to the work with hearts full of Christ-like tenderness, compassion, and love.”—Ellen G. White, [Australasian] Union Conference Record, July 28, 1899.**

## Shield, Helmet, and Sword

**When** and how should believers as combatants in the great controversy use the shield, the helmet, and the sword? *Eph. 6:16, 17.*

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Paul's *shield* is the large, rectangular shield of a Roman legionnaire. Made with wood and covered with leather, its edges curved inward to guard against attacks from the side. When soaked in water, shields were "able to quench . . . fiery darts" (*NKJV*), extinguishing arrows dipped in pitch and set on fire. Paul's description of the "shield of faith" reflects the Old Testament use of the shield as a symbol of God, who protects His people (*Gen. 15:1, Ps. 3:3*). To take up "the shield of faith" (*Eph. 6:16*) is to enter the cosmic battle with confidence in God, who fights on behalf of believers (*Eph. 6:10*), supplies the finest weaponry (*Eph. 6:11, 13*), and who ensures victory.

At the same time, the Roman battle helmet was made of iron or bronze. To the bowl that protected the head were added a plate at the back to guard the neck, ear guards, a brow ridge, and hinged plates to protect the cheeks. Given the essential protection the helmet provided, "the helmet of salvation" (*Eph. 6:17*) symbolizes the present salvation believers experience in solidarity with the resurrected, ascended, and exalted Christ (*Eph. 2:6–10*). To put on "the helmet of salvation" means to reject the fear of spiritual powers so common in the time and, instead, to trust in the supreme power of Christ (*compare Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:1–10*).

The final item of armor is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (*Eph. 6:17*), referring to the Roman legionnaire's short, two-edged sword. The usual battle tactic was to throw two javelins (not mentioned by Paul) and then draw the sword and charge, employing the short sword in a thrusting motion. The believers' sword is "the sword of the Spirit" in that it is supplied by the Spirit, a weapon identified as "the word of God." Paul steps forward as general and issues a call to arms, speaking promises of hope and victory from the divine Commander in Chief. It is these promises, issued in Ephesians 6:10–20, that constitute "the word of God" as the lead weapon in the battle against evil. The "word of God," then, refers to the broad promises of the gospel that we find in the Bible.

**Even if we might not like so many military images, what should this imagery teach us about just how literal the great controversy really is and how seriously we should take it?**

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## Practicing Battlefield Prayer

In concluding his battle exhortation, Paul urges believers as soldiers to participate in crucial, continuing prayer “for all the saints” (*Eph. 6:18, NKJV*) and for himself as imprisoned ambassador (*Eph. 6:19, 20*). This call to prayer can be seen as an extension of the military imagery, since calling out to God (or to the gods) in prayer was a common practice on the ancient battlefield. To cite a biblical example: following the battle exhortation of Jahaziel, Jehoshaphat leads “all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” in falling down “before the LORD, worshipping the LORD” (*2 Chron. 20:18, ESV*). While prayer is not a seventh piece of armor, it is an integral part of Paul’s battle exhortation and military metaphor.

In the first of two prayer requests, Paul asks the addressees to participate in fervent, urgent, and perseverant prayer “for all the saints” (*Eph. 6:18, NKJV*). If the church is to be successful in its battle against the powers of evil, it will need to practice dependence on God through Spirit-inspired prayer.

Paul’s second prayer request is for himself: “and also for me” (*Eph. 6:19, ESV*). He asks for prayer that God might grant him the right message (“that words may be given to me”), at the right time (“in opening my mouth”), delivered in the right way (“boldly to proclaim”), and addressing a most important theme, “the mystery of the gospel” (*Eph. 6:19, ESV*). This last phrase refers to what we might call the “open secret” of God’s intervention in Christ to redeem Gentiles along with Jews (*see Eph. 3:1–13*), creating “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV; see also Eph. 2:11–22*) as a signal of the overarching plan “to unite all things” in Christ (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*).

**Review** the following “calls to prayer” in the New Testament. Which one inspires you most? Why? *Luke 18:1–8, Phil. 4:6, Col. 4:2, 1 Thess. 5:16–18.*

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Why are believers so often urged to participate in earnest, persevering prayer? Paul’s military metaphor suggests two answers: (1) the threat of spiritual battle against an array of supernatural enemies is dire and real; and (2) God’s promises of spiritual strength and victory are illustrated through Paul’s military imagery (*Eph. 6:10–17*). Earnest, persevering prayer provides opportunity for us to listen carefully to these promises, to celebrate them, and to thank God for the resources of His grace.

**Further Thought:** “An army in battle would become confused and weakened unless all worked in concert. If the soldiers should act out their own impulsive ideas, without reference to each other’s positions and work, they would be a collection of independent atoms; they could not do the work of an organized body. So the soldiers of Christ must act in harmony. They alone must not be cherished. If they do this, the Lord’s people in the place of being in perfect harmony, of one mind, one purpose, and consecrated to one grand object, will find efforts fruitless, their time and capabilities wasted. Union is strength. A few converted souls acting in harmony, acting for one grand purpose, under one head, will achieve victories at every encounter.”—Ellen G. White, *Spalding and Magan Collection*, p. 121.

What is the significance of Paul’s labeling himself “an ambassador in chains” (*Eph. 6:20, ESV*)? Ambassadors often played challenging roles during wartime; so, Paul’s self-description fits the context of his military metaphor. Ambassadors were to be treated with the respect due the person or country that sent them. So there is stark contrast between Paul’s status as ambassador for the Supreme Ruler of the cosmos and the utter disrespect signaled by his *chains* (literally, “chain”). However, since ambassadors would wear a “chain of office,” Paul’s mention of a “chain” may be “spiced with irony,” in which he sees his chain as “a decoration to be worn with distinction.”—David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 152.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In your corner of a world divided and at war, what does it mean for you and your congregation to “wage peace”? How can we be agents of peace in a world so increasingly characterized by aggression and violence?
- ❷ What particular “fiery darts” are being hurled in your direction? How can you ensure that the “shield of faith” is in place to extinguish them?
- ❸ We sometimes speak of “prayer warriors.” How might we conduct “prayer ministry” based on Ephesians 6:18–20?
- ❹ How should we treat those who are wounded on the battlefield of the great controversy? How should we treat the Christian believer who, in the heat of the battle, flees out of fear or openly capitulates to the other side?

# Ephesians *in the* Heart



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ephesians 1–Ephesians 6.*

**Memory Text:** “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (*Ephesians 2:8–10, NKJV*).

Visitors to London climb on board the London Eye, a Ferris-wheel-like attraction. From 450 feet above the River Thames you can see it all: Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, and the many historic palaces and cathedrals. For New Testament scholar Nicholas Thomas “Tom” Wright, “the letter to the Ephesians stands in relation to the rest of Paul’s letters rather like the London Eye. It isn’t the longest or fullest of his writings, but it offers a breathtaking view of the entire landscape. From here, as the wheel turns, you get a bird’s-eye view of one theme after another.”—*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: S.P.C.K. [Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Publishing], 2004), p. 3.

In Ephesians, Paul is not focused on issues of local concern. The letter reads as though Paul were addressing believers everywhere and Christian churches wherever they exist. The letter’s timeless feel allows the “breathtaking view” Paul offers to invade our own world and thought. As we review each chapter, let’s keep this question in mind: What important truths embedded in Ephesians should continue to shape our lives as believers?

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 30.

## We Are Blessed in Christ

Someone has described Ephesians as the Alps of the New Testament. Paul, our mountaineering guide, takes us on a rapid ascent in Ephesians 1. We are quickly breathless and amazed at the view from the summit.

**Reflect** on Ephesians 1. What especially inspires you? What peaks do you see?

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Ephesians 1:3–14 functions like a map at a mountain’s summit that identifies the peaks on the horizon, as Paul orients us to our blessed place in the vast landscape of the plan of salvation. The scenery covers the full span of salvation history, from eternity past, through God’s grace-filled actions in Christ, to eternity future. God’s redemption of believers reflects divine initiatives taken “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*), which are now being worked out in our lives (see *Eph. 1:7, 8, 13, 14*). These pre-Creation strategies will be fully accomplished at the end of time (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). Then, “all things,” both “in heaven” and “on earth” will be gathered together or united in Christ, and God’s plan for “the fullness of time” (*ESV*) will be fulfilled (*Eph. 1:10*). Then, we will experience fully God’s mysterious plan (*Eph. 1:9*). In the present, we may be certain that the Christ-centered salvation in which we stand is an important part of God’s wide-reaching plan for the redemption of “all things.”

Being on a mountaintop inspires thanksgiving. In Ephesians 1:15–19, Paul gives thanks to God as he prays that believers may experience the salvation God has planned for them. We find ourselves on another steep climb as he points us upward to the risen, ascended, exalted Christ, who rules over every imaginable power for all time (*Eph. 1:20–23*).

Through the grace of God expressed in Christ Jesus, we may live this day on the mountaintop!

**Ephesians 1:4 tells us that Christ “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (*NKJV*). Think about what that means. Chosen in Him before the world existed! What great hope should this offer you in regard to God’s desire for you to be saved?**

## We Are Redeemed for Community

**As** you read Ephesians 2, seek to answer the following question: What has God done for us through His Son Jesus Christ?

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“But God. . . .” Those two words must be the most hope-filled ones known to humankind. In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul describes the grim past of his audience. Sharing the plight of all humanity, they were bent toward rebellion against God, their lives dominated by sin and Satan (*Eph. 2:1–3*). “But God, who is rich in mercy . . .” And what did God do for them and for us? (1) He made us alive with Christ—Christ’s resurrection is our own. (2) He raised us up with Christ—Christ’s ascension is our own. (3) In heaven, He seated us with Christ—Christ’s coronation is our own (*Eph. 2:4–7*). We are not just bystanders to the cosmos-shifting events of Christ’s life! God takes these remarkable actions, not because of any merit in us but because of His grace (*Eph. 2:8, 9*), and He intends believers to live in solidarity with Jesus and practice “good works” (*Eph. 2:10*).

If Ephesians 2:1–10 teaches that we live in solidarity with Jesus, Ephesians 2:11–22 teaches that we live in solidarity with others as part of His church. Jesus’ death has both vertical benefits, establishing the believer’s relationship with God (*Eph. 2:1–10*), and horizontal ones, cementing our relationships with others (*Eph. 2:11–22*). Through His cross, Jesus demolishes all that divides Gentile believers from Jewish ones, including the misuse of the Law to widen the gulf (*Eph. 2:11–18*). Jesus also builds something—an amazing, new temple composed of believers. Gentiles, once excluded from worship in sacred places of the temple, now join Jewish believers in becoming one. We, too, become part of God’s church, a “holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph. 2:19–22*).

Through the grace of God, you have the privilege of living this day in solidarity with Jesus and your fellow believers.

Ephesians 2:8–10 has played a role in the conversion of many. Martin Luther found in these verses a grace that won his heart, and he discovered as well some central affirmations of the Reformation: salvation comes by faith alone, through grace alone, by Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone. In 1738, eighteen days after experiencing conversion in London’s Aldersgate Street, John Wesley preached at Oxford University, offering “a cry from the heart” and “the manifesto of a new movement.” His text? Ephesians 2:8. (See A. Skevington Wood, “Strangely Warmed: The Wesleys and the Evangelical Awakening,” *Christian History* [magazine], vol. 5, no. 1 [1984]).

## We Are the Church of the Living God

**Why** is it both important and exciting to be part of God's church? Ephesians 3.

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We are encouraged when we hear church members say positive things about the church. However, the most enthusiastic among us falls short of Paul's exuberant testimony in Ephesians 3 about the church. Paul starts a report of his prayers for believers in Ephesus (*Eph. 3:1; compare Eph. 1:15–23, NKJV*) but breaks off to discuss God's creation of the church (*Eph. 3:2–13*), and then completes his prayer report (*Eph. 3:14–21*). Along the way we come to understand important things about God's "plan" or "mystery":

- In eternity, God conceives of "the mystery" or "the plan" about the church (*Eph. 3:3–5, 9, 11*).
- Through the life and death of Jesus, that long-hidden plan is "accomplished" (*Eph. 3:11, NKJV; compare Eph. 2:11–22*).
- By revelation, Paul learns "the mystery" of the church and the astonishing fact that Gentiles are to be full partners in it (*Eph. 3:3–6*).
- Paul participates in spreading this good news as preacher to the Gentiles of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (*Eph. 3:8, 9*).
- With many won to Christ, the church, composed as it is of both Jews and Gentiles, displays "the manifold wisdom of God" to "the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (*Eph. 3:10, NKJV*), announcing their coming doom (*compare Eph. 6:10–20*). The plan to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:10*) is underway, and their time is short.

This understanding of the church motivates Paul to pray for believers. Why not imagine him praying the heartfelt prayer of Ephesians 3:14–21 about you? Why not imagine him praying that you will be "filled with all the fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:19*) and participate fully in the amazing, unfolding mystery of a unified church?

**What are the kinds of barriers between believers in our church that, in light of what Paul has written, should not be there? What can you do to help remove them?**

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## The Unity of Faith

**In** Ephesians 4, Paul asks believers to stop doing some things and to be sure to do others. What are those things?

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Ephesians 4 begins and ends with calls to care for each other as church members (*Eph. 4:1–3, 32*). Between these invitations, Paul offers strong support for the idea that we should nourish unity in the church. He begins by listing seven “ones”: There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord (Jesus Christ), one faith, one baptism, one God and Father (*Eph. 4:4–6*). We are bound together by these spiritual realities. We are, in fact, united.

While unity is a theological certainty, it requires our hard work. So, we should always be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3, NKJV*). One way each of us may do so is by being an active “part” of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:7–16*). Every member is a gifted part of the body and should contribute to the health of it (*Eph. 4:7, 16*). And all should benefit by the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (*Eph. 4:11, 12*). These, like ligaments and tendons, have a unifying function, helping us grow up together into Christ who is the Head of the body (*Eph. 4:13, 15*).

At the time, Paul also told them “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (*Eph. 4:14, NKJV*), words that clearly suggest that the early church faced some internal struggles from “the trickery of men.”

As Paul moves toward his final appeal, to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (*Eph. 4:32, NKJV*), he asks believers to avoid their former hard-heartedness (*Eph. 4:17–24*) and to avoid anger and harsh speech, substituting instead language that builds up and imparts grace (*Eph. 4:25–31*).

This chapter on unity is easy enough to read when things are peaceful. It is more challenging—and important—to read it when we become embroiled in some conflict. Are you remembering today to experience the unity of the body of Christ, the unity for which He died?

**What are ways that we can contribute to the unity of our church, both at the local and worldwide levels? Why is it important that we do what we can?**

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## We Are Recipients and Givers of Grace

As you read Ephesians 5, reflect on how Paul asks us to live out the gospel in our relationships with others. Which of his exhortations is especially meaningful to you?

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If you start reading Ephesians 5 at its beginning, you may miss the full power of an important theme. So, start instead with Ephesians 4:32, in which Paul tells the Ephesians to “be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (*NKJV*).

As believers, we are called to model our behavior toward others on God’s forgiveness and grace toward us. We are to imitate God! (*Compare Matt. 5:43–48.*)

Paul contrasts this imitating-the-love-of-God lifestyle with the usual, pagan approach. Instead of treasuring others as brothers or sisters in the family of God, humans all too often use others for their own sexual pleasure and then brag about it (*Eph. 5:3, 4*). He warns that such an approach has no future in the new world God is planning (*Eph. 5:5–7*).

Instead, believers are to turn from the darkness of their past and “walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8–10*), mimicking the Father’s love. Again, Paul warns us away from “works of darkness” done “in secret” (*Eph. 5:11, 12*). By contrast, we are to live in the light of Christ (*Eph. 5:13, 14*). Rather than wasting our lives in drunkenness, we will be “redeeming the time” by offering thanks to God for His love (*see Eph. 5:15–21*).

Paul extends his theme of imitating God’s love as he advises Christian husbands and wives. Christ’s self-sacrificing love for the church becomes the model for Christian husbands (*Eph. 5:25–33*), while the loyalty of the church toward Christ becomes the model for Christian wives (*Eph. 5:22–24*). Rather than using the gift of human sexuality in a debauched and selfish way, a Christian husband and wife focus on valuing and treasuring each other, becoming “one flesh” (*Eph. 5:28–33*).

“Be imitators of God as dear children” (*Eph. 5:1, NKJV*). By God’s grace, you are called today to live out that exhortation in your relationships with others.

**How does Ephesians 5:2, which tells us to “walk in love,” help us understand what Paul means in Ephesians 5:1 about being “imitators of God”?**

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**Further Thought:** We conclude by reflecting on Ephesians 6, where we discover that we, the church, are the peace-waging army of God.

In Ephesians, Paul has portrayed the church as the body of Christ (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 4:11–16*), as God’s temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*), and as the bride/wife of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*). In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul describes the church as God’s army and offers a vigorous call to arms. It is a passage that offers much benefit and risks misunderstanding.

We could misunderstand Paul’s words as a call to take up military weapons or to be combative in our relationships with others. Paul, though, has been emphasizing unity, edifying speech, and tenderheartedness (*see especially Eph. 4:25–5:2*). He describes God’s good news as “the gospel of peace” (*Eph. 6:15*). Through this vivid military metaphor, the church is not exhorted to wage war in the traditional sense. Rather, we are to wage peace in the spiritual battle against evil. Paul steps onto the battlefield of the great controversy and calls us to enlist in God’s army.

We should do so with a realistic assessment of the enemy in view since it will never do to underestimate the forces arrayed against us. We don’t confront just human enemies but “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NKJV*), led by a wily general, the devil (*Eph. 6:11*). However, we need not be daunted by our enemies. God is present with us in the battle (*Eph. 6:10*) and has supplied us with the finest of weaponry, His own armor, the “armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11; compare Isa. 59:15–17*). He has placed at our disposal truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit (*Eph. 6:13–17*). With God going before us and our being equipped from head to toe in the armor He has supplied, we cannot fail. Victory is assured.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① Though we are not saved by our works, what does Paul mean when he writes that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (*Eph. 2:10, NKJV*)? What, then, is the purpose of our good works?
- ② Paul writes: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (*Eph. 3:20, NKJV*). What power works in us, and how should this power be made manifest in our lives?